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ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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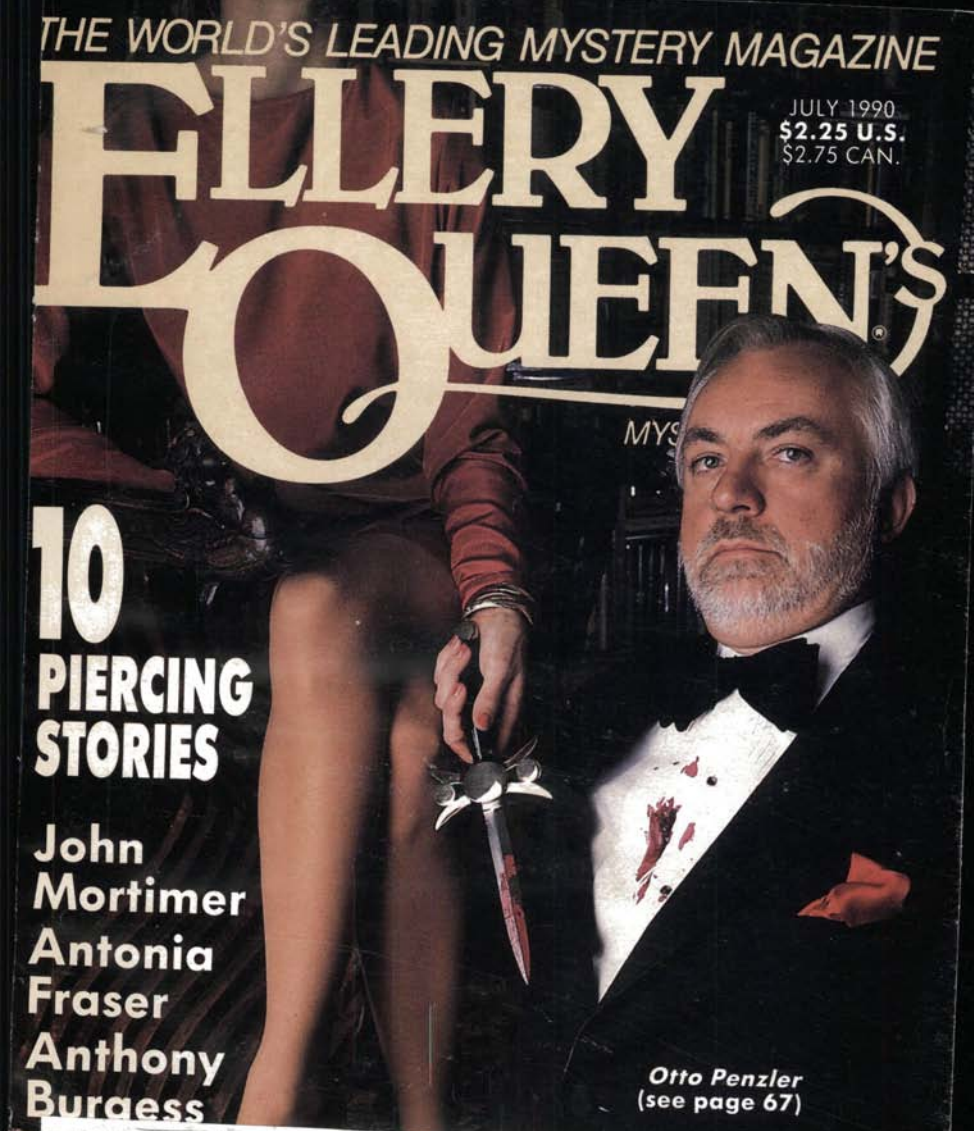

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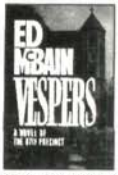

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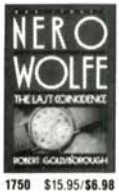

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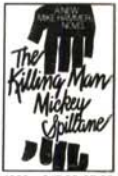

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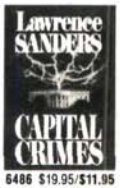

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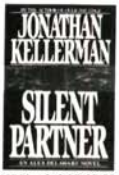

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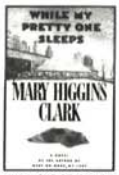

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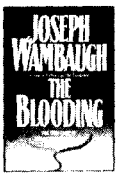

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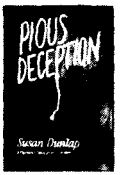

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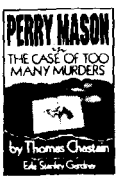

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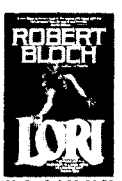

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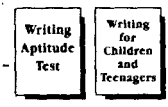

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A *NEW* Inspector Donoghue story by

PETER TURNBULL

"When it comes down to it," Donoghue had told Sussock, "all we had to offer was circumstantial evidence, Ray, so I suppose that they were right not to convict. But I would have been happier with 'not proven'—less of a slap in the face for us. I don't like him walking away without a stain on his character any more than you. But that's life."

"Not proven"—the uniquely Scottish verdict. It meant, so far as Sussock had always interpreted it, "You can walk free, but not without stain on your character." It meant "We think you did it but we can't prove it so we cannot find you guilty," but you are similarly not "not guilty" because "not guilty" implies innocence. "Not proven" is a highly useful third verdict available to juries in Scottish criminal procedure . . .

PERVERSE JUDGMENT

by PETER TURNBULL

The man stood in the gentlemen's lavatory, urinating carelessly, steadying himself at first by rocking backward and forward on widely planted feet and then later by leaning forward, holding himself off the wall with an outstretched arm. The brass and copper fittings above the porcelain swam in his eyes, the single down pipe became two and then merged back into one. Another man stood beside him, a well dressed, dark-suited man who, seeing the condition of the first, moved away to the farthest end of the line of urinals.

The first man belched and felt vomit rising, but he looked up at the ceiling and managed to keep the vomit down. He staggered

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backward and stood in the center of the room, forcing himself to concentrate as he struggled with his zip fastener. He left the lavatory and went back to the bar, back to whisky and lager.

The pub was deeply carpeted, solidly furnished with highly polished dark wood. No music or space-invader machines. The patrons were reserved, socially skilled, confident, well dressed. The waiters and the barman were well turned out with black trousers and white shirts with black bowties, and they snapped to attentive service when addressed. It was a professional men's pub, close to the High Court of Glasgow and Strathkelvin, patronized mainly by lawyers and journalists—but mainly by lawyers.

The man staggered back to the bar, overconcentrating to ensure that he walked a straight line, placing one foot in front of the other, swaying, then stopped to contain the sway and continued. He was aware of disapproving looks from the pin-stripe-suited men sitting in leather chairs in front of round tables, and from slightly built boyish waiters not at all used to such a spectacle—not in this pub, not on these premises. He reached the richly polished bar, climbed onto the paisley-patterned bar stool, and sat squarely in front of his drink—two glasses, one of lager and one of whisky. Tastelessly on the bar top was his money, a few notes and some coins, and his packet of cigarettes and his box of matches. Had he been in the snug of a wee bar in Partick or Finnieston down there underneath the Kingston Bridge, he would not be out of place, but here in this bar—

The man was called Sussock. He was a cop. He'd been in the bar for four hours. Maybe five, he couldn't remember. Maybe even six at the very outside.

Pretty boys get away with murder, he said to himself. He looked up and leered at the barman, who latterly ensured that he stood beyond Sussock's reach. He was a barman with experience. Sussock looked at him, concentrating, concentrating hard. "Whisky," he said finally.

The barman shook his head slowly, authoritatively. "I've just called your transport, sir," he said.

Sussock nodded. No is no. He curled his fingers around his lager, raised it to his lips, and drank it. Some of the liquid went down his throat—most dribbled down his chin and neck and soaked his shirt. He slammed the glass down on the bar top hard.

See him standing there, see him pretty-boy perfect, see his baby face, clean-cut, tall, standing there in the dock. Him and his coun-

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sel—hey, his counsel, they knew what they were about all right, they knew what they were doing, challenging every member of the jury—until the jury was top-heavy with women, and middle-aged women at that. And see him when he took the stand and said, "Not guilty." You could just see all those middle-aged hearts fluttering. Sussock's head sank lower.

He shook himself and pulled himself up. He read the time on the clock behind the bar, below the spirit rack. 10:15 P.M.

Time to go home, one more drink and—no, he said no. The barman had said no, the barman in the white shirt had said no. So home. Where's home? Oh, yes—a room up the West End. A room with a bed and a chair and a wardrobe—the sort of room that's called a bedsitter—that's home for you, just shy of your sixtieth year of life. A bedsitter.

He had said not guilty, had pretty boy, and the women of the jury—the women of the jury—their eyes had widened as they gazed across the courtroom at him. Sussock had watched them composing love letters in their heads to Mr. Perfect, who stood on trial for murder. Sussock had watched the jurors and he knew then that the trial was going to be just a game, just as he knew that pretty boy had crept up behind his manager and shot him in the back of the head.

Bang. You're dead. One shot, powerful automatic, nine mm. Good enough, Gunga Din—blew the man's face off and I mean off. Spread his brains everywhere. As Donoghue had said just before he had taken his leave to return to Edinburgh to his home, somewhat different from Sussock's, being a bungalow with a wife and two children keeping the homefires burning for him—as he had said—what was their exchange? Sussock shook his head vigorously, then recalled it:

"When it comes down to it, all we had to offer was circumstantial evidence, Ray, so I suppose that they were right not to convict. But I would have been happier with 'not proven'—less of a slap in the face for us. I didn't like him walking away without a stain on his character any more than you. But that's life. I have to go, don't want to be late. Can I drop you somewhere?"

Sussock had said, "No, thank you, sir," to the well dressed man some fifteen to twenty years his junior. "I think I'll stay for one more. One for the road."

"As you wish," Donoghue had replied. "See you in the morning,

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Ray." Sussock had nodded his farewell and had ordered a lager with a whisky chaser from the barman in the white shirt.

"Not proven," the uniquely Scottish verdict. It meant, so far as Sussock had always interpreted it, "You can walk free, but not without stain on your character." It meant "We think you did it but we can't prove it so we cannot find you guilty," but you are similarly not "not guilty" because "not guilty" implies innocence. "Not proven" is a highly useful third verdict available to juries in Scottish criminal procedure.

Sussock had had his one for the road. And a chaser to follow it. He had not been able to muster Donoghue's professional detachment. Perhaps that was why he hadn't got any further than Detective Sergeant. He just didn't have the polish. He thought the verdict brought in by all those fluttering hearts had been—what was the term?—yes, that was it, a "perverse judgment." It happened from time to time in Sussock's not inconsiderable experience. Someone who is clearly guilty is found not guilty and so the judge has to let him walk. Like the man who night after night broke into Buckingham Palace, until one night he entered Her Majesty's bed chamber and spoke with Her Majesty while sampling the Royal cognac. Guilty of burglary? Twelve good people and five didn't think so. The guy walked and the national gasp of surprise was heard around the world.

Or, conversely, like the woman in Australia whose baby was snatched from the family tent by a wild dog. She was guilty of nothing, but the jury at her trial didn't think so. The judge who wanted to let her go free without a blemish on her good name had to sentence her to ten years with hard labor.

Perverse judgment.

So today, this very day, in the High Court of Glasgow and Strathkelvin, a pretty boy smiled smugly as the jury delivered what in Sussock's opinion was a perverse judgment. "Not guilty," had proclaimed the lady foreperson in a hat and a matching two-piece. And the pretty boy had smirked.

Sussock had seen him smirk and had also seen the sudden look of shock and horror cross the faces of one or two jurors as they saw for the first time what darkness might lie behind the look of angelic innocence that had stood before them all that morning and half of the afternoon. But by then it was too late and the pretty boy had not waited to be dismissed. He had just turned and walked out of

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the court, and as he did so the lady in the hat and the matching two-piece sat heavily, as if her legs had given way.

Blood and brains splattered on the concrete uprights of the underground car park, a few feet away the man's body lying where it had fallen chest down in a pool of motor oil—all discovered by the older car-park attendant who had hobbled down the ramp to investigate the echoing explosion which seemed to have come from the lower level. The leg of the car-park attendant was gammy because of a small piece of Chinese-made metal that had embedded itself near the hip many years ago when the man was a thirty-five-year-old sergeant on overseas duty in a place called Korea. Now a car-park attendant, he never forgot the sounds of small-arms fire, even when the sound was distorted by repeated echoes in a labyrinth.

"Some backfire that," said the younger attendant, sipping his tea.

"It's no backfire," had said the older man. "Go and see what it is."

"You go."

"I can't—my leg. I need to rest it."

"Your leg doesn't stop you going to the pub every day of your life," had said the younger man. "If you think it's so important, you go."

And minutes later the older man had hobbled back up the ramp and barked at the younger man to call the police. Ray Sussock had arrived together with Richard King and a van full of uniformed officers, who set about cordoning off the locus of the offense with orange tape.

The first thing that Sussock saw and the lasting memory of the incident was the man's shoes. They were brand new, shiny new even underneath, so new that the price label had not yet been peeled from the sole of the left shoe.

Sussock drank more lager. The barman's face was still there, still in front of him. It split and became two faces, then he became two men. Sussock closed his eyes and opened them. "Going to give me more bevvy, son?" he said pleadingly.

The barman shook his head.

He shook his head just like the other man had shaken his head. "No," he'd said. "No, Mr. Murray had no enemies. He built the firm up, played golf, spent as much time as he could with his family. He was my partner and my friend—and believe me, Sergeant Sussock, if he had had enemies I would have known."

Later Donoghue had sat back in his chair, smart in a three-piece suit, sucking and blowing on his pipe. He, too, had shaken his head.

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"This Mr. Clean image of the deceased, I don't like it, Ray—it doesn't gel with the M.O. of the murderer. This was a professional job, an assassination."

"What do you suggest, sir?" Sussock had asked deferentially, feeling as he always did when in the presence of the clean-cut D.I. Donoghue—grimy.

"Well—" Donoghue had placed his pipe down "—let's beaver away at what might be behind the deceased's public image. Then make routine enquiries among his colleagues. What is his profession?"

"Insurance broker, sir."

"What lies behind, Ray, what lies behind?"

What lies? Sussock swayed on the bar stool and steadied himself on the edge of the richly polished bar. He looked at the barman and this time the barman had only to shake his head. Sussock wondered what lay behind anybody's image. What lay behind the image of the barman, silently, contemptuously mocking Sussock's state—what skeletons were in his closet? But maybe, thought Sussock, maybe he was a bit young to have collected any skeletons yet. Sussock's lip curled into a barely perceptible smile. Think it's all going to go your way, don't you, smiling child? Yes, well, we all did at your age.

And what lay behind the portly lawyer in the smart suit who came up to the bar and ordered a brandy and sniffed at Sussock before moving farther away along the bar? Sussock looked at him. And how have you become so fat, sir? How many overinflated fees have you presented, how many innocents are in jail because of your inefficient defense—not even a perverse judgment to explain it. Perverse judgment is bad luck, but inefficient defense is criminal. Go on, drink your drink.

And what lay behind his own image, sitting there swaying on a bar stool, dribbling his alcohol? What image did he present, let alone what might lie behind it? Poor old sod, that's what they're saying, poor old drunken sod, I hope I don't end up like that. Look at him. I don't know why they let him in here, he'd be better off in the Salvation Army hostel. That's what they're thinking, Sussock knew it was what they were thinking. He didn't give a damn. Life isn't an adventure, it's a judgment. Sometimes it's benign. Sometimes it's fair. Sometimes it's harsh. Sometimes it's perverse.

Sussock had put King onto the enquiry into the background of the deceased. King was a young cop, chubby, bearded, diligent—painstakingly diligent. He had completed his enquiries within a week. Mr. Murray was Mr. Clean.

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"Well, back to the insurance brokerage," Donoghue had said, smiling as he had said it. "King's a good man. If there was any dirt on Murray he would have found it. Interview everybody in the brokerage—let's see what infighting and petty jealousies might exist."

"Yes, sir," Sussock had said, again feeling grimy.

"What about the other senior partner? How does he stand to benefit from the death of Murray?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, sir," Sussock had said.

And Donoghue had raised an eyebrow in that manner he had.

Loss of senior partner, effect of. Sussock's eyes closed and he opened them again. He still had a good measure of whisky left in his glass. He added water from the jug. The brim of the jug rattled against the glass as he poured. The water weakened his tipple, but it gave him more tipple to tipple. He wondered what the loss of the senior partner in his life would mean to him.

Bliss.

He sipped his much-diluted whisky. See you, barman, standing there smiling, thinking that it's all going to fall into place—marry a nice girl, settle down, a couple of kids, grandmother round for Christmas. In fact, you end up perched like this, perched like a proper bar-stool turkey, lager and a whisky chaser, too drunk to be bothered about feeling out of place among the polish and the smart attentiveness and the low hum of learned conversation.

"Problems in the firm?" John Devine, slim and smart, gold tiepin, had considered the question. "No more than usual. We're doing good business, we're not playing any dirty tricks on competitors and they're not playing dirty tricks on us, nobody's put a virus into our computer and we haven't done so to anybody else's. Business has grown steadily over the years and we've cultivated a lot of good customers and the snowball rolls. You know how it is, Sergeant Sussock—it's been good for us, a solid, steady growth, very healthy."

Sussock had asked if anybody from within the firm had any grudges against Mr. Murray.

"No," Devine had replied, but only after a thoughtful pause.

"Would anybody benefit from his death?"

"Nobody," Devine had replied quietly. "His wife and two sons will benefit financially, but that will be slim compensation for them for the loss of a doting father and husband. I saw them this morning. They're devastated."

Sussock had then returned to the last question. Did Mr. Devine's

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pause before he answered imply that there *was* some ill feeling between Mr. Murray and another person?

"Not that ought to lead onto murder," Devine had replied, "which is why I hesitated before answering. But, yes, there is a problem."

"Tell me."

"We have a junior partner, Quentin Quillan by name. There was ill feeling between Mr. Quillan and Mr. Murray."

"Oh?" Sussock had said and looked out of the window as a blue-and-yellow Kelvin Scottish bus, gleamingly clean, swept down Kilmarnock Road toward the city center.

"Mr. Quillan is a young man, very ambitious. Too ambitious. What I mean by that is that I like ambition, I like drive, but there can come a point where the man becomes more than ambitious—he becomes a zealot, he bulldozes, he wants success and advancement and he wants it now. He can't wait for his Porsche, and he won't."

"And that," had ventured Sussock, "is Mr. Quillan?"

"That is Mr. Quillan," Devine had nodded. "There may well be room for the likes of Quillan in the City, in London, where stockbrokers of his age go for 'the burn,' as they call it. But insurance is a profession. It may well be a competitive profession, but it's still a profession and we expect our juniors to behave professionally—to advance at a professional pace and to conduct themselves as a professional."

"Not so Mr. Quillan?"

"Not so Mr. Quillan," Devine had said. "He is rude and aggressive. Mr. Murray couldn't approve Mr. Quillan taking the next stage of his professional examination until his attitude changed. He had spoken to Quillan, told him that he wanted him to 'consolidate,' and given him three months to shake his ideas up. He had also given him numerous written warnings about his conduct, both to staff and to customers. You see, if there was a typing error in one of his letters, he would reduce the girls to tears. We lost a couple of excellent secretaries because of the way he treated them. If a customer refused to buy a policy Quillan had offered, he'd treat the customer in the same manner as he treated the typist. He was beginning to lose us customers."

"Serious."

"Very. He's a problem," Devine had said. "He seems to take every setback as a personal rejection, and he expects doors to open for him after a single soft tap. Whereas in life we have to break down doors,

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if you see what I mean—we have to fling ourselves at doors time and time again before we get through them, if at all."

"Mr. Murray was holding him back?"

"Well," Devine had replied, "Quillan thought so most certainly. And I think Mr. Murray was right to hold him back—he couldn't let a man like Quillan proceed too far, not without the aforementioned attitude change, and we couldn't get rid of him so easily because we'd given him a junior partnership. That was before we realized the nature of the beast we had let into the sheepfold. Mr. Murray once said, 'Who will rid me of this troublesome partner?' Mr. Murray was a Shakespeare scholar in his free time."

"I see." Sussock had nodded.

"But Quillan is a problem. He can't move to another brokerage because his reputation precedes him, and the reference that David Murray would have written for him would have been damning—David Murray was not the sort of man to write a piece of fiction in order to rid himself of a troublesome partner."

"So," Sussock had summarized what Devine had told him, "Quillan probably felt trapped in this brokerage and that Mr. Murray was getting in his way."

"Probably," Devine had replied. "In fact, certainly. But I can't believe he would murder David."

Sussock then told Devine that he had been a policeman most of his working life and he was close to retiring and he had by now ceased to be surprised by anything. He had then asked Devine to tell him more about Quillan, junior partner in Murray, Devine & Co., Insurance Brokers, Kilmarnock Road, Glasgow.

"Well," Devine had commenced, "he's about twenty-six, twenty-seven perhaps, top marks at college, so he's bright, he's got it upstairs all right. His father died when he was young, he was an only child, and was then brought up by his mother, who left him a considerable sum of money in her will, but not enough for him to retire on."

"Spoiled rotten," Sussock had observed.

"That's not for me to say, but I wouldn't be surprised. I really had limited dealings with Mr. Quillan, having another junior partner under my wing. Quillan was David Murray's pigeon."

And later Donoghue had said, "Bring in this man Quillan, Ray. I like not the sound of him, and thou and I shall question him. Closely."

Look at you, smiling boy. Sussock focused with bleary, bloodshot

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eyes, looking at the barman, who still stood in front of him, out of reach. Sussock grabbed the glass that had contained his lager, put it to his mouth, and, finding the glass empty, he flung it down, smashing it on the floor.

Silence. Sudden silence.

The barman held up his hand to someone who evidently stood behind Sussock.

Again Sussock looked at the barman—he looked at him with one eye, the only eye he could open. Think it's all going to work out for you, don't you, laughing boy? Think you're going to play the field and then bump into some centerfold, going to marry and raise children, progress spectacularly in some profession. But see, it doesn't exactly work out like that, laughing boy. *I* thought it was going to be like that, but it turns out sour, it becomes poisoned. Your nice sweet girl grows up into a twisted shrew, your son who was good at sports at school goes away from home and returns with rings dangling from his ears and a string of boy friends. And your happy home, the home you built, the home that Grandma visits at Christmas, they—the shrew and your son—force you out of it, conspire against you, so they do, and force you out into the street, so you have to take a bedsitting room. At your time of life, you in a bedsit, with students as neighbors! And if you believed in God, you'd think He was handing down a dreadful judgment on you and—well, just stand there looking at me like that, laughing. Hey, you're just a child, you don't know what's ahead of you, you've yet to go where you're driven to sit alone in a bus shelter all evening. See me, I've been where you've been, I've been where you've still to go.

Quillan: No problems, no problems at all.
Donoghue: None? You're a lucky man.
Quillan: Perhaps. Perhaps I'm just good.
Donoghue: Are you?
Quillan: Am I what?
Donoghue: Good.
Quillan: At what?
Donoghue: Whatever it is that you do.
Quillan: Yes.
Donoghue: How did you get on with Mr. Murray?
Quillan: Very well indeed.
Donoghue: That's not what we heard.

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Quillan (nervously): Well, we might have had an argument once or twice, but who doesn't?

Donoghue: Once or twice?

Quillan (agitated): I never counted. I don't bear a grudge. Once the row is over, it's over. That's the way I like it. You know, no hard feelings.

Donoghue: But he was standing in your way, Quentin. Mr. Murray was blocking your advancement.

Quillan (sourly): Nobody gets in my way.

Donoghue: That right?

Quillan (worried): I want a lawyer.

Donoghue: Why? You're not under suspicion.

Quillan (surprised): I'm not?

Donoghue: Should you be?

Quillan: I—no. Look, don't play games—of course I shouldn't be under suspicion.

Donoghue: Do you really think it's an "of course" question?

Quillan: I'm not saying anything.

Sussock: Oh, I think that you're saying quite a lot.

Quillan (to Donoghue): Who's talking to me, you or this old guy?

Donoghue: Both of us.

Sussock: Live alone, do you?

Quillan: None of your business.

Donoghue: Answer the gentleman's question.

Quillan (after an indignant pause): Yes.

Donoghue: How do you fill in your free time?

Quillan (stiffens with self-importance): I'm an officer in Her Majesty's Armed Forces.

Donoghue (feigns being impressed): Really?

Quillan: I have a captaincy in the Army Reserve—parachute regiment to be exact.

Sussock: To be exact.

Donoghue: We'd like you to wait here for an hour or two.

Quillan: Why? Am I under arrest?

Sussock: No. You're being detained.

Quillan: I want a lawyer—now!

"I want a lawyer," said Sussock to the barman. "A good divorce lawyer."

"So that's your problem, is it, Jim?" said the barman. "I was wondering just what it was that was eating you away from the inside."

"I want a lawyer," Sussock said again.

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"I think you're probably going to need one," said the barman solemnly.

Inderdass had said, "Warned, he was scared stiff—shaking with fear."

"You're a junior partner, too," Sussock had clarified Inderdass's status.

"Yes—" Inderdass had nodded "—same status as Quentin, but I work with Mr. Devine. I'm on his team. Quentin was with Mr. Murray."

"I see. So what did he say again?"

"He asked me to tell you that he and I were drinking together all night last Thursday week."

"The night Mr. Murray was murdered?"

"Yes."

"Did you not think it strange?" Sussock had queried.

"Yes, I did, but Quentin said he had nothing to hide but why draw suspicion on ourselves. He said that we could alibi each other and the law would pass us by. I said I didn't need an alibi, I was with my fiancee all evening, at her parents' house, with her parents and her brother."

Sussock had then asked how Quillan had reacted to that.

"Like he always did when he didn't get his way. He called me for everything and stormed away to the typing pool to make feathers fly in there."

Then Sussock had asked the crucial question. "Did anybody witness him asking you to alibi him?"

"No."

"Some of us are good, some are not so good," had said the rigid and very proper officer. "Some of us are well up to Regular Army standards. Quillan wasn't. He looked good on dress parade, cut a dash in the kilt, but that's all you can say for him. The men despised him. No good on exercises—the men just wouldn't follow him. In the end, I had to give him a desk job, shuffling papers. Ideally I'd want rid of him, but he holds a Queen's commission. It can't be taken from him."

"He would know how to use a gun?"

"Oh, certainly. He was given full small-arms training and he wasn't slow to ask advice—best ways to kill somebody and all that.

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He knew there was more to killing than pointing the piece and squeezing the trigger."

"Did he ask you about—well, specialty techniques?" Sussock had ventured.

"Not personally," the rigid and proper officer had replied. "But if at any one time we had a visitor who'd seen action somewhere, especially with the Special Forces, Quillan would be the one to push a drink in his hand and push him into a corner and pump him for information."

"Could he get hold of a gun?"

"Not legally. He has access to the Armory but he has to sign weapons in and out, can't steal one." The officer had paused. "But, illegally, yes—especially now after the Falklands campaign. The boys came back from the South Atlantic with automatic pistols in their kitbags they'd confiscated from Argentinian officers, you see."

"I see."

"They came back as heroes and nobody is going to search the kitbag of a hero—military police, Customs and excise, nobody. So for weeks after that, men in the reserve services and even members of the public were buying automatics and spare ammunition clips for the price of dinner for two. Those weapons are still circulating, and one or two surface from time to time and are seized, but the majority are still circulating. Ask about Quillan at Slim Jim's."

"Slim Jim's," Sussock had repeated. "Is that a bar?"

"A gymnasium. Quillan was a fitness fanatic. Had to keep in trim, keep the waist slim and the buttocks tight. Can't wear the kilt otherwise."

"I saw him with a gun," Slim Jim had told Sussock.

Sussock had wondered why he hadn't reported it.

"Because Quillan's a big mouth and a braggart. So I knew that it was an imitation."

"You knew?" Sussock had echoed with despair.

"The guy shoots lines all over the place." Slim Jim had stood square on at Sussock, a towel draped round his neck. "See him, he says he's in the Special Forces, but I knew he's a clerk in the Reserves, he's selling people insurance that they don't need. See him, he told me he was with the Paras at Goose Green, said he saw his best mate get shot by the Argies, but I've got documentary evidence to show that he signed to join the gym on the very day of the battle. On the very day that he was supposed to be six thousand miles away

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doing or dying for Queen and country, he was sitting at that table there filling out forms and writing a check."

"What did he say when you saw the gun?"

"Said there was someone in his way and he was going to waste him."

"What did you do?"

"I said, 'Come on, sonny, come this way,' and I took him around the circuit, extra hard workout for his big mouth. See him, he wouldn't be able to move much the day after that."

"When was that?" Sussock had asked.

"Week ago last Wednesday."

"I think he moved a lot more than you might think. Did anybody else see the gun?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Did anybody else hear him threaten to waste whoever it was that was in his way?"

"Not to my knowledge, Sergeant."

Donoghue: What did you do with the gun?
Quillan: What gun?
Sussock: Bottom of the Clyde, I expect, sir.

"Prisoner at the bar—are you listening? Prisoner at the bar, I'm now going to prefer charges. You are not obliged to say anything, but anything you do say will be taken down and may be used in evidence. The charge against you is that on the second day of October you did produce a firearm, you did aim the firearm at David Murray, hereinafter referred to as the deceased, you did discharge the firearm at the deceased, you did wound the deceased all to his hurt and severe injury, and that you did murder him."

"You won't make that stick."

In the event, they didn't make it stick. The jury said not guilty.

Smirk.

And the lady foreperson sat as if poleaxed.

"I suppose that they were right not to convict," Donoghue had said. "Because we couldn't offer corroborative evidence, it was wholly circumstantial, but a 'not proven' verdict would have been satisfying."

"It was a perverse judgment, if you ask me," Sussock had said.

"It's as close as you can spit to being a perverse judgment, but I don't think that it was one," Donoghue said. "I know he did it, you

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know he did it, he knows he did it, and I think the jury *now* knows he did it, but at the end of the day all the evidence was, as I said, circumstantial. Come on, I think we could both use a drink. There's a pub just around the corner—full of lawyers, but it'll do for a quick one."

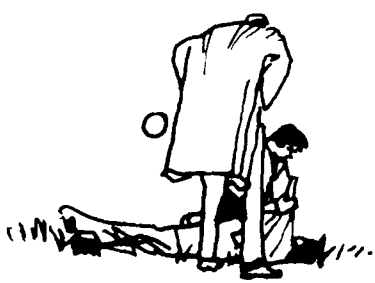
Donoghue had bought the drinks and then said he was going. Sussock had said that he'd stay for just one more.

Fatal.

Sussock concentrated on his hand and tried to pick up his glass of whisky. He noticed the barman nod to somebody behind him and point to Sussock. Then two men in blue uniforms stood at either side of him. Each took hold of one of his arms.

"I'm a police officer," Sussock said.

He was not so drunk not to notice the look of dismay registering on the young constable's face.



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In our May 1988 issue we published some excerpts from Miss Manners'® Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior *by Judith Martin and titled them "Right and Wrong." Following are excerpts from Judith Martin's wonderfully decisive new volume,* Miss Manners'® Guide for the Turn-of-the-Millennium, *about which Quentin Crisp says: "As society crumbles, Miss Manners becomes firmer—and more hilarious. I found her new book human, humorous, and helpful . . ."*

MORE ABOUT RIGHT AND WRONG

by MISS MANNERS

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

I was recently a suspect in the arson of my home. The accusation was unfounded, but while being questioned by the local authorities, I kept my wits about me enough to notice that the policemen invariably addressed me by my first name after introducing themselves as "Detective Bubblehead" or "Detective Slow." I found this familiarity offensive, but I was, understandably, a trifle timid about making my displeasure known at the time. Is it correct for the police to address adult suspects by their first names? Should I have asked their first names and used them? Or should I have told them I preferred the use of my surname to the informality of "Where were you at four-thirty, Jan?"

GENTLE READER:

As a matter of etiquette, the police were quite wrong to address you by your first name. As a practical matter, you were quite right to assume that it would not be a good idea for a suspected arsonist to correct the manners of the arresting officers. However, now that you are cleared, Miss Manners hopes you will take the trouble to

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lodge a complaint for the good it may do to future suspects who feel the restraint that you did. The suspicion that you burned your house down does not entitle police to belittle your dignity.

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

Now that burglary, murder, and so on have become a way of life, don't you think that some protocol should be set up about how neighbors should behave? Suppose that our neighbors' house is burgled and their silver stolen. Should we:

1. Pretend that nothing has happened and just say "Have a nice day" when we meet them?

2. Keep peeping through the drapes to see what, if anything, is going on next door?

3. Go over and sympathize with them for having such a stupid dog that dirties our lawn and then sleeps while burglars burgle?

4. Send some silver and a bottle of champagne, or would a six-pack and some baloney do?

5. Just chain our own VCR to the table?

Or suppose that the neighbor's wife is murdered. Should we:

1. Condole with the husband even if, in our view, he is the prime suspect?

2. Inquire about how it was done?

GENTLE READER:

Satisfying one's curiosity about the neighbors' troubles is not strictly correct, but it may be done under the guise of sympathy. If the crime has been made public, or if the commotion connected with it was such as to make it obvious that it cannot be kept secret—if, for example, your street was cordoned off—you may say, "I'm so sorry about what happened. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to help." This gives the victim the choice of refusing to discuss his problems, which you must then respect, or of telling all. Miss Manners hopes that the satisfaction of hearing the neighbor tell you how he murdered his wife compensates you for the obligation you will then have to appear in court.

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

My sister, age eighteen, was home alone one night and answered the door, thinking that it was some friends, when she was startled

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to see a strange old man. She tried to shut the door on him while he pushed from the other side, crying, "Let me in, sweetie." She finally managed to shut the door on him, catching his finger in the door. It turns out that this was our neighbor's elderly father, and he had made a mistake as to which home his daughter lived in. He had to go to the hospital and lost a nail. This tiff has caused a feud between us and the neighbors. The question is: Who should apologize?

GENTLE READER:

Both. This is a ghastly situation that is nobody's fault, but two apologies are better than none. Your sister's should be "I'm terribly sorry, but you see, I was terrified of a stranger's attempt to push his way in." That should elicit a second one, along the lines of "We are frightfully sorry, but Father was confused."

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

I am a counselor, and many of my clients are victims of physical or sexual child abuse, referred to me because of inappropriate feelings of guilt. The cause of this guilt, it seems to me, is usually the failure of nearly everyone involved to follow the rules of etiquette: The child is asked what he or she did to bring the abuse about and why he or she didn't report it immediately—usually with the implication that the child covertly enjoyed the abuse and is practically responsible for it.

I hold that there is a general rule here, which applies to all victims of crime. What we call "crime" is behavior sufficiently rude to warrant a legal prohibition against it. Since it is rude, there is no excuse for it, and it imposes obligations only upon the perpetrator. Unfortunately, it seems to be assumed that the perpetrators of criminal rudeness can guide their actions by self-interest, while the victims are bound by obligations. It seems to me that quite the converse is true. One cannot impose obligations upon people of any age by beating or raping them.

Surprisingly enough, few people agree with me that the rules of etiquette apply with the same force to criminally rude behavior as they do to more mundane branches of correct behavior. Do you agree that criminal behavior which has a victim violates not only the law of the land but also the laws of etiquette, and should be held accountable to both?

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GENTLE READER:

Could we sort out this request just a bit? Miss Manners is in great sympathy with you, but surely you do not expect her either to reclassify crime under the lesser charge of rudeness or to interfere with criminal investigations. She recognizes that there is an etiquette question there. We surely do not disagree on the heinousness of child abuse. You are welcome, if you wish, to point out that criminals are, by definition, rude.

What Miss Manners thinks you are really after is to establish etiquette rules for noncriminals (family, friends, acquaintances, perhaps police or medical workers, maybe even busybodies) in discussing the crime with the victim. Admittedly, some of these people have no right to mention it. Those who are truly close to the child or who are professionally involved will need to question the victim. It so happens that the effective way of doing this is also the polite way. That is, to put things in a kind, low-key, nonprejudicial manner. Slanted questions tend to inspire skewed answers. "What happened just before that?" is a better question, both to gather information and to spare the child's feelings, than "Did you do anything to encourage this?" "Did you think of telling anyone?" is better than "Why didn't you report it sooner?" Miss Manners hasn't spent a lifetime as a journalist without understanding that the simple, polite question elicits the most revealing answer.

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

I am the victim of a violent crime which included rape. After the event, police formalities, and so on, I was in a state of grief and shock. Although directed to psychotherapists, I would have appreciated more fully a display of manners by those around me. The pastor at my church seemed to feel that my family would be snubbed, even though the armed robber/rapist had given me no choice. So, our pastor forbade me to speak of the crime to anyone. Consequently, I found myself unable to explain my grief. It hurt more to have the pastor offer and ask for prayer for those who were ill or who had died, but skip our family. There is no formal color, like that of mourning, worn by a crime victim, so my sudden tears were interpreted as "psychological disturbance."

At the same time, relatives who were informed by my mother sometimes seemed to intrude, asking too many questions. It was just as if they had asked about the nature and duration of a disease that

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had caused death. I didn't want to be reminded of why I grieved. Also, relatives expected me to attend a wedding, and our church expected me to attend as usual.

As being a victim of crime is nothing to feel dignified about, what should I have done?

GENTLE READER:

While Miss Manners thoroughly endorses your request for sympathetic understanding, she wishes to point out that widespread "sharing" of your experience is, by your own account, hardly more conducive to this than a general pretense that it didn't happen and that you should therefore behave normally. The curiosity that people display in hearing about a crime is not to be confused with what you want, which is comfort.

It is interesting that you compare this period with mourning. Since formal mourning practices have been abandoned, the bereaved have similar experiences both with insensitive prying and with prodding expectations to behave normally in circumstances for which their feelings are too fragile. Traditionally, people understood the necessity of withdrawing from the rough and tumble of life at such periods, as they were not up to it. You may not be able to get away altogether, but you should certainly eschew ordinary social life until you are recovered. This is the time to draw heavily on the sympathy of your intimates—not the world at large, but those people who are able to put aside their own busybodiness to offer you emotional sustenance in private. Incidentally, your pastor certainly ought to be one of them.

DEAR MISS MANNERS:

We are a group of women who play cards weekly. In the middle of a game, one of the women begins to whistle. I find this disturbing and ill-mannered. When I mentioned this, I was told that there is nothing wrong with a woman whistling.

GENTLE READER:

Traditionally, whistling during card games is not a matter of gender so much as survival. Miss Manners prefers that such people be silenced with a glare, but has heard of its being done with a bullet.

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DEAR MISS MANNERS:

What is the proper salutation for a former congressman or judge who has been convicted of accepting bribes and is now serving his country in a federal penitentiary? I know that former public officials are normally addressed as "The Honorable John Doe," but does the conviction for acts of moral turpitude serve to revoke the "Honorable"? Where I come from, this is not a theoretical question.

GENTLE READER:

At the rate things are going, we may soon need a set of regulations spelling out exactly which of the many interesting forms of moral turpitude that our public servants seem to enjoy indulging in should result in revoking their privilege of being addressed as "Honorable." Miss Manners will be sorry when that happens. The ironic humor in so addressing an inmate of a federal penitentiary fills her with such glee that she is tempted to find out who your former state officials are for the sheer pleasure of writing out those envelopes.

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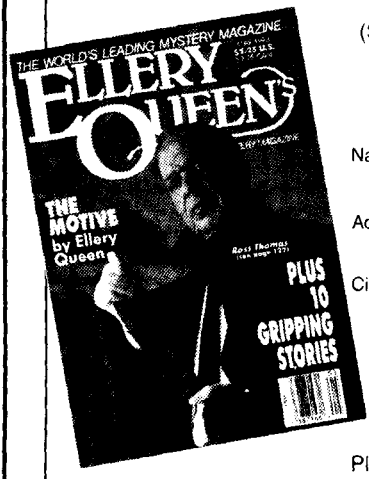

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a *NEW* short story by

ANTONIA FRASER

In the June 1987 issue, we published Antonia Fraser's "On the Battlements," a tour de force about the battle of the sexes in which the author's knowledge of Shakespeare played a, well, disarming role. Now, two years later, Lady Antonia has done it again, this time using her obvious love of opera as a, well, backdrop for the drama. A reminder of how successfully writers can use their special knowledge to amuse and edify their readers.

Antonia Fraser's latest Jemima Shore mystery, The Cavalier Case, *was published in February (in hardcover) by Bantam, which has also just reissued all of the previous Jemima Shore titles in a mass-market edition . . .*

OUT FOR THE COUNTESS

A Story of Operatic Revenge

by ANTONIA FRASER

"*Dove sono?*" questioned the dulcet plangent voice of Emily Nissaki at the beginning of the last act of *The Marriage of Figaro*. And: Where indeed are they, those previous happy moments? silently echoed Leila Hopper from the third row of the stalls.

"*Dove andaro i giuramenti—*" sang the handsome black-haired American soprano in the role she was rapidly making her own. And: Too right, where have they gone, those vows of a deceiving tongue? recited Leila bitterly to herself. She felt at that moment that she had all too much in common with the Countess Almaviva since both of them faced a predicament caused essentially by an unfaithful man.

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"Oh, heavens! To what humiliation am I reduced by a cruel husband!" Those words also had found a tragic echo in Leila's heart. Except that Leila intended to deal with her own, offstage predicament rather differently. No masquerade for her, no changing clothes with her maid—what maid? Leila didn't have a maid—and, above all, no sweet reconciliation at the end of the day.

"Piu docile io sono—" Yes, the forgiving countess on stage was going to be a good deal kinder to her husband than Leila was going to be to Charlie Hopper. For what Leila had in mind was murder.

Not the murder of Charlie himself, however. Reared on the fine old tradition of operatic vengeance, Leila planned something subtler, crueler, and finally, she hoped, more devastating. She intended that at the post-opera party in the theater bar for the theater's patrons, Charlie should personally administer poison to his mistress. Not for nothing had Leila thrilled to the macabre and tragic plight of Rigoletto, convinced the wayward Duke was in the sack which actually contained the body of his daughter. And then there were the twists of the plot of *Tosca* by which the singer finally delivered her own lover's death warrant. Charlie should hand the poisoned chalice—actually, the free glass of wine for the patrons—to Magdalen Belport. Thus he would always know that he personally had brought about her agonizing death.

What about Leila's own position in all this? Did she really expect to elude discovery for very long? It was true that she had persuaded Charlie in one of his good-husbandly moments to purchase the poison in question on her behalf. (A peculiarly nasty garden potion destined to reduce errant lawns to scorched earth, it was accompanied by a list of warnings which had caused Charlie to observe mildly: "What price the ecology these days, darling?" But when Leila had retorted, "If you weren't away so much and helped me more in the garden—" he had dumped the poison and hastily changed the subject.) Since Charlie had indubitably purchased the poison, it would be Charlie's word against hers when it came to the question of who had actually administered it.

At the same time, more grandly, Leila did not expect and did not want to avoid discovery for very long for the crime of passion she was about to commit. After all, what did life hold for her now that she had lost Charlie?

"J'ai perdu mon Eurydice—" Leila adored Gluck—even if she was an unlikely Orpheus and Charlie, handsome, broad-shouldered Charlie, an even more improbable Eurydice.

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But Magdalen Belport, of all women in the world! It was not that Magdalen lacked beauty. Whatever the merits of the late Earl of Belport, who died childless some years ago, leaving Magdalen, his fourth, much-younger wife, a large fortune and the right to queen it at Belport Park for her lifetime, he had known how to pick one who would in a sense grace the role of countess. Previous countesses had been renowned for their looks in periods which stretched back into the Thirties.

Magdalen, a former model (as the newspapers never failed to point out), had the long fine legs, the narrow hips, and neatly catlike features of her original profession. With her elegant, unchanging leanness—she had to be well over forty—and an endless fund of money at her disposal, Magdalen could cut more dash at a patrons' function in a pair of white-silk trousers and a sequined matador's jacket than all the other women in more conventional evening dress. Leila knew. She had seen her do it.

No, the fearful cruelty of Charlie's behavior lay in the relative positions of Leila and Magdalen within the Festival organization. And who knew the facts of this better than Charlie himself? As Countess of Belport, by far the most glamorous local figure, Magdalen acted as titular Chairman of the Festival Committee. This meant that she attended at least one committee meeting and bought a great many tickets—some of which she always gave away, whether she attended the performance or not, since her friends were not exactly passionate lovers of the opera. If Magdalen did attend, she could be guaranteed to behave with the utmost benevolence, glittering matador jacket and all, and make remarks which were on the whole gracefully innocuous—Magdalen liked to please. Then she always went on to accept all the credit for the work of the Festival. That was the work which had actually been carried out dutifully, devotedly, day in and day out, or so it often seemed, by Leila Hopper.

Leila's love of opera might be verging on the obsessional—she knew in her heart that it was—but then, so she had always thought, was Charlie's own passion for the subject. And yet he had not appreciated the sheer disloyalty of an affair with Magdalen Belport. It was as though to denigrate all their shared feelings for the Festival, the pooled task of finding singers, arranging programs, in all of which Charlie had so often told Leila, "You *are* the Belport Festival. Don't worry about the public thanks. Magdalen, Countess of B., is just our essential figurehead, a publicity-mad mermaid on the prow of our ship."

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Given Charlie's essentially lighthearted temperament, the wayward nature Leila both loved and deplored, she had often thought that a passion for opera was the deepest, most stable thing in her husband's life. Had it not drawn them together in the first place—that magic evening at the Colosseum listening to Linda Esther Gray as Isolde? Yes, opera was Charlie's greatest passion—until his passion for Magdalen Belport, that is.

"My lovely Countess." Leila would always remember how she found out: those words overheard on the telephone when Charlie had imagined she was working late in her tiny Festival office, following immediately on the highly disquieting incident of the trip to Venice.

Charlie had always traveled a great deal, mainly to America, since his work as a rather grand kind of salesman demanded it, and Leila, since she had no choice, accepted the fact. Charlie did, after all, in consequence get to hear of rising young stars in the States who might be prepared to visit Belport: that was part of the way in which the Festival work had drawn traveling Charlie and homebound Leila together. Emily Nissaki, whom Charlie had heard sing Mimi while in Chicago, was an example of that kind of happy serendipity between husband and wife.

What Leila did not accept, could never accept, and was now going to take violent action to end, was Charlie's new passion for Magdalen, which meant that since that Venetian trip—as it turned out to be—he had hardly seemed to cast an affectionate glance in Leila's direction, let alone a caress. No Micaela bewailing her lost happiness with Don Jose had ever felt more piercing sorrow than Leila recalling how long it was since Charlie had last made love to her.

"Charlie Hopper! Last seen in Harry's Bar in Venice!" Odd that those seemingly innocent words of international traveling snobbery could have destroyed Leila's peace of mind forever. It was some party at Belport Park in aid, as usual, of fund-raising for the Festival. Leila didn't know the man concerned—a big man with receding brown curly hair and a well cut suit, which probably concealed rather too many years of good living. At Harry's Bar, Venice, and elsewhere.

Charlie had never, so far as Leila knew, been to Venice. The reason she thought she knew this was that La Fenice was one of those opera houses, described but never visited, which they had both yearned to see for themselves. Someone who *had* been to

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Venice—many times, no doubt, but certainly very recently—was Magdalen Belport. In her generous way she had even brought Leila a present back—some elegant gold-and-glass beads. (What treachery that now seemed! Leila had since smashed them into pieces.) The necklace was intended, Magdalen said, as a thank-you to Leila for all the hard work she had done in the run-up to the present Festival.

"Harry's Bar?" questioned Charlie—he was using his lying voice; Leila who loved him could tell immediately. "I don't get it."

But Magdalen interrupted him. Unlike Charlie, she spoke rather too fast, as if concerned to override whatever Charlie might be going to say.

"Venice!" she exclaimed. "Don't you remember? We bumped into each other. There was that vast mass of people, all making a terrible noise. You were alone. I was with a large party."

"Oh—Venice," said Charlie after a pause, as though he had somehow thought the conversation to be about quite another place—New York, Boston, Chicago (to name three cities he had recently visited). He gazed steadily at Magdalen, which meant of course that he avoided looking at Leila. "Harry's Bar in *Venice*," he repeated, still staring at Magdalen with that yearning intensity.

Later that night, Leila was first of all informed by Charlie that he had only briefly visited Venice from Munich (where he also sometimes went on business en route from the United States) and had hardly thought it worthwhile mentioning to her. Then he changed his story. The truth was, he finally blurted out—after some hours of talk in which the subject never quite went away—that Magdalen Belport had asked him to escort her to an opera gala at La Fenice. She had been let down and she needed an escort—"you know what she's like." Charlie had been in Munich, they had been in touch over some matter to do with the Festival, and he had flown down. There was nothing else to it. Absolutely nothing. And now would Leila stop all this and leave him in peace?

He had closed the conversation by going out of the room abruptly and slamming the door. But Leila saw by the light on the telephone that he went to make a call—a call that lasted some time. And when he did come to bed, once again he turned away from his wife.

The next morning all he said was: "I thought you might be jealous missing out on La Fenice. You can ask Magdalen if you like. There's nothing else to it."

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Jealous! It hardly seemed an adequate description of her bewildered feelings. Nor did she intend to raise the subject with Magdalen Belport.

It was Magdalen who raised it with her—the next morning paying one of her rare visits to the Festival office. She used exactly the same phrase as Charlie had, Leila noticed.

"An escort, darling. There was nothing else to it."

"What *was* it?" asked Leila suddenly and, for her, very sharply, so that Magdalen opened her slanting cat's eyes in astonishment.

"The opera," Leila almost shouted. "What opera did you go to?"

But at this Magdalen merely smiled in her most feline, lazy way. "Oh, darling, you don't expect me to remember that. But I do know what I wore: grey-satin blazer from St. Laurent, very pretty with paler-grey-crepe trousers."

It was quite possible, thought Leila rather weakly, that Magdalen was actually speaking the truth.

Then: "My lovely Countess." It was those words, overheard twelve hours later, which finally convinced Leila that the unbelievable had to be believable: her adored Charlie had transferred all the passion of his nature to Magdalen Belport. And after that, of course, in a terrible, brutal way, everything began to fit in. Charlie's increasingly obvious desire to please Magdalen, for example, notably during the meetings of the Festival Committee. His flattery of her taste—even her taste in opera and possible singers for the Festival! Now that was really going too far. My lovely Countess, perhaps, but knowledgeable about opera never!

"Countess, perdono." On stage, the opera was almost over, and the count—a short, fat man with none of Charlie's handsome looks—was asking his wife to forgive him.

"I am kinder—I will say yes," his wife responded in the rather better-looking incarnation of Emily Nissaki. It had always been one of the moving moments in all Leila's canon of opera. No longer. For Charlie (and Magdalen), there was to be no forgiveness. In a very short time, the post-opera party would begin at the theater bar. And a very short time after that, Magdalen, Countess of Belport, would be dead.

How convenient that Leila, as secretary of the committee, generally looked after the doling out of the patrons' free drink. It was with special care that she handed the fatal glass to Charlie in order that he might, equally fatally, pass it on. "I've got something special

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for her. She really wants champagne, of course, but this is at least better than the usual plonk," she told him.

Then Leila could not resist adding—what madness overtook her when she had held her tongue for so long?—"Take it to your lovely Countess."

For a moment, Charlie, now holding the glass, stood staring at Leila. His expression was one of total amazement, followed almost immediately by guilt. She knows. That was what his expression said to her, as clear as words. She's known all the time.

Leila's own expression, which had been momentarily triumphant, changed to blandness. "Go on, darling, give it to her." It was her usual polite, affectionate tone, the tone of an organizer who needs to make everyone happy. "*Figaro* is not exactly short. She must need it."

"She must indeed," replied Charlie levelly, the amazement and the guilt by now well concealed. He turned away.

Leila followed the direction of his tall black dinner-jacketed figure, that formal guise which set off his fair English good looks to perfection. She watched him edge his way through the crowd, polite, skillful, not spilling a drop. There he went remorselessly toward the corner where Magdalen Belport, svelte as ever in one of her embroidered jackets which surely came direct from Christian Lacroix, held court. Despite the crowd which surrounded her, Magdalen looked up to give him a special, intimate smile. Leila watched Charlie, holding her breath. Now—now. Let him hold out the glass, let him perhaps kiss her on the cheek—for the last time—but let him at least hold out the glass, let his be the hand, let her drink from it—

But wait! No, for God's sake—

"No!" screamed Leila involuntarily. She stopped. No, Charlie, no, she wanted to cry, not *her!*

It was too late. Already the wine was coursing down the throat of Emily Nissaki, that pampered throat soon to be closed and silent forever in death, as she flung back her handsome head with its abundant coils of dark hair, the relic of her Greek ancestry, smiling her thanks with her bold black sloe eyes fixed on Charlie, who had handed her the drink.

Beside her, Magdalen, Countess of Belport, wondered when Charlie Hopper, or at least that hard-working, opera-mad wife of his, would bother to bring *her* a drink. After all, she was the Chairman of the Festival. Hadn't there been something about a special glass

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of wine? Yet Leila had been behaving so curiously lately, sulking really—she who had always been so grateful for everything. Could she possibly have found out about Charlie? Magdalen hoped to God she wasn't planning to leave the Festival office or anything drastic like that. Leila was so clever, so inventive.

So when was that special glass of wine coming? The plonk in the theater bar was famously disgusting, poisonous one might almost say, even if that face the lead singer was now pulling was surely slightly over the top even for a dramatic soprano.

The death of Emily Nissaki, popularly described as being on-stage—the theater bar was surely near enough to count as that—created a predictable sensation. There were those, it is true, who suggested that her macabre ending cast a false retrospective glamour on her actual talent. But then none of those critics had probably heard her sing in person: those few records so far released did not quite do her justice. These same critics had not, for example, as Charlie Hopper had done, ecstatically followed Emily Nissaki around American opera houses—and to Venice—throughout her brief career; following that first *coup de foudre* meeting with her in Chicago.

Finally Charlie had secured, with some quiet manipulation, that "my lovely Countess" as he was wont to call her—a reference to that glorious night together following her performance in *Figaro* at La Fenice—should come to the Belport Festival. Even if it had involved flattery beyond the call of duty to Magdalen Belport—still remarkable-looking, if you like, and a good sort, but altogether too fond of making men into slaves. If Charlie was going to be a slave, it was to an opera singer like Emily Nissaki, not to an idle rich woman.

To the rest of the spectators, the way in which Leila Hopper shortly before confessing her crime cried out, "The wrong Countess!" and then quoted the general exclamation at the end of *Figaro* of "Heavens! What do I see?" made no sense. "The wrong Countess"—what could that mean? She had known, surely she had known, of Charlie's affair with Emily Nissaki—otherwise, why poison her?

She must have known. It was Magdalen Belport, for example, who reported seeing Emily Nissaki and Charlie Hopper together in Venice.

"Not that I told Leila," Magdalen added quickly. "In fact, after Geoffrey's gaffe, I tried like mad to cover up for Charlie by pretending he was alone—whereas of course he was hanging round the

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neck of that wretched singer, Emily Whatnot. And then I backed him up with Leila to the hilt. Some cock-and-bull story about going to the opera. As if one didn't have better things to do in Venice! Absolutely to the hilt."

It was only Charlie himself, broken not only by the death of Emily but also by the part he had unwittingly played in it, who knew exactly what his wife had meant by her frantic cry of "The wrong Countess!" And her use of those words from *Figaro*—"Heavens! What do I see?"—when the right Countess finally stepped out of the alcove to reveal herself confirmed it to him. (Not that he could ever tell Magdalen Belport, unaware both of Leila's suspicions and of the peril which had threatened her.)

"Take it to your lovely Countess." How could Charlie have looked in any other direction than toward Emily Nissaki? And so, in a sense, Leila Hopper, self-confessed murderess, did have her operatic revenge.

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The barn was beautiful, painted a nice buttercup yellow with fresh white trim, and the house looked as if a strong breeze would blow it down. One of those big old farmhouses with a sagging porch and peeling paint. You've seen places like it if you've ever driven down a country road. The yard was full of stuff that might come in handy sometime, like car parts and old radios. The porch was packed with old furniture, a couple of washing machines, boxes of empty bottles, everything covered with a thick film of dust.

Inside was even worse . . .

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

by LESLIE MEIER

The call came in, bright and early, on a Saturday morning in February. It was a possible double homicide out on a farm in a nothing place called Thompson's Ridge, a few miles from Middletown. It took me a while to get there—I got lost a few times and the road wasn't too good. The flasher on a cruiser caught my eye as I eased around a sharp curve, so I headed up a long dirt driveway. The state-issue Chevy slipped and slid. We were having a thaw and the combination of mud and cow pats was treacherous.

God, I hate farms. I hate the smell and I hate the way they look. This place was no different. Great for cows and crummy for people. The barn was beautiful, painted a nice buttercup yellow with fresh white trim, and the house looked as if a strong breeze would blow it down. One of those big old farmhouses with a sagging porch and peeling paint. You've seen places like it if you've ever driven down a country road. The yard was full of stuff that might come in handy sometime, like car parts and old radios. The porch was packed with old furniture, a couple of washing machines, boxes of empty bottles, everything covered with a thick film of dust.

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Inside was even worse. The first thing I noticed was the wallpaper. Ugliest stuff I ever saw, bright-green leaves twisting and climbing all over like some tropical vine. The second thing was the blood. It was everywhere. Splashes and smears on the refrigerator, the walls, the cupboards, handprints on the cellar door, and a good-sized puddle coagulating on the floor under the kitchen table.

"A knifing?" I asked the uniformed cop I found bending over the taped outline on the floor.

"No. No knives, just fists. Two old brothers," he said, rising and taking out his notebook. "Chester Neal, aged seventy-seven, and Herbert Neal, seventy-nine. We found one here in the kitchen and the other one at the bottom of the cellar stairs. I'm Joe Molloy with the Middletown P.D. We got the call around six this morning. A niece called. She's waiting in the living room."

"Detective Sergeant Alan Parker, State Police," I said, extending my hand.

"Glad to meet you. I'll be happy to help any way I can. I want to get the animals that did this."

I could see the anger in his eyes and the way the muscles tensed along his jaw. I wouldn't be a local cop for anything. It's too easy to get involved when you know the victims and the perpetrators, see them every day in the grocery store and across the aisle at church.

"How about filling me in?"

He glanced at the notebook and began. "The niece lives down the road. She noticed the lights weren't on as usual over here when she got up this morning and she came to investigate. Both the old fellas were unconscious, but still alive. She called right away. Rescue squad took them to the hospital in town.

"There's no sign of forced entry." Molloy indicated the door, dirty and smeared with blood but still intact. "They must have let them in, but that's not so unusual. The Neals were known for being helpful. Quite a few folks have found that curve down front to be sharper than they expected. The Neals were always pulling cars out of that low, boggy place with their tractor and getting them back on the road. Everybody knew about it. If somebody came knocking on the door, they wouldn't be suspicious, they'd just think it was another damn fool who took the curve too fast."

"Anything taken?"

"That's the other thing. Everybody knew they both carried a lot of cash. They always had a wad of money—I guess they didn't trust

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the bank. They didn't flash it around, but I'll bet they usually carried a thousand dollars each, maybe more."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They paid cash for everything, didn't believe in credit. It never would have occurred to them it was a risky thing to do. They'd be more upset about coming up short on the feed bill. They never would've thought someone from around here would hurt them for their money."

"You think it was someone from around here?" I asked Molloy.

"Well, sir, local knowledge does seem to be indicated. Just look at this place. If you didn't know the Neals, you wouldn't think they'd have any money, would you?"

Looking around the kitchen, I had to agree. Underneath the blood and mess was evidence of a simple farm life. Two wooden armchairs with worn and mismatched cushions were pulled up to the kitchen table. The Neals predated the concept of "disposable," so their appliances were old but functional. An ancient Philco black-and-white TV sat on a small wooden stand in the corner, next to an even older toaster.

The table was cluttered with handy items: pencils, rubber bands, ashtray and smokes, keys, and an enormous sugar bowl. A spare chair, painted white a long time ago, held a pile of newspapers. The air was musty—even the house had that barn smell—but the brothers had been clean in a bachelor fashion, using and washing the same few dishes over and over. A woman would have thought the place needed a good turning out, but the two old men had arranged things to suit themselves, from the economy-sized jar of instant coffee in the middle of the stove to the feed-store calendar on the wall.

Looking down the cellar stairs, a steep flight of rough wooden steps, I could see the taped outline on the floor, a dark stain shadowing where the head had lain.

"Which brother was this?" I asked Molloy.

"Chester. The medics thought he was in pretty bad shape. Broken neck from the fall on top of the beating. They don't think he'll live."

"Right. Where's the niece?"

Molloy led me into a parlor filled with furniture my wife would have paid too much for at an antique shop. A middle-aged woman stood looking out the window, twisting her hands together.

"Mrs. Strout, this is Detective Sergeant Parker from the State Police. He has some questions for you."

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"Oh, yes," she said softly, turning to face us. "Joey, has there been any word from the hospital?"

Molloy shook his head.

"Why don't we go there together, Mrs. Strout?" I suggested. "You can answer my questions on the way."

A brief smile flitted across her face, easing for a moment the lines of worry and concern. Once she must have been a very pretty girl.

"Just start at the beginning," I said, cautiously shifting into drive and releasing the brake for the long slide down the driveway.

"I live in that house down the road there. Every morning I go out to get the paper out of the tube and I see the lights up at my uncles'. They get up around four to milk the cows and have breakfast at six. This morning I didn't see any lights, so I went up to see what was the matter. I couldn't imagine what was wrong, but I didn't expect—" She paused and rummaged in her purse for a tissue.

"It was horrible. The door was wide open and the house was cold. Bert was lying on the kitchen floor, moaning. His face was all bruised. I wouldn't have recognized him except for his hair. It's dark and real thick even though he's close to eighty. Uncle Chet was at the bottom of the stairs and he was lying very still. Too still. I called the rescue squad and the police. I covered them with blankets, but I tried not to disturb anything. I hope I did the right thing. I hope I didn't destroy any evidence." She looked at me for reassurance.

"You did the right thing," I told her.

"Do you think you'll catch whoever did it?" she asked.

"Molloy thinks there was a certain local knowledge indicated. Do you agree?"

"Nobody who knew them would have hurt them," she asserted. "But somebody might have known *of* them. They were local characters, if you know what I mean."

I had an idea what she meant, but I asked her to clarify.

"I guess you could say they were a little bit odd. Old-fashioned, maybe. They lived together on the farm their whole lives. They were born there, you know. Never married. I guess farming doesn't give you much time to go looking for a wife. They were up at four every morning and in bed by eight most nights. Sometimes they'd stay up to watch *Hee-Haw* or a *Grand Old Opry* special.

"When you've got cows, you can't go and take a vacation. Cows have got to be milked and fed every day. And they have that old

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coal furnace—has to be filled every twelve hours or it goes out and the pipes freeze. They're really tied to that place.

"They go into town two or three times a week. They buy groceries, or go to the feed store or the hardware store. That's their social life. They stop at the Donut Shack and chat a while. Bert's kind of quiet, he doesn't say much. Chet's always got a funny story to tell. He loves riddles and does the crossword puzzle every day. Chet really knows how to make you laugh.

"They go to church every Sunday, and a lot of people around here have a lot to be grateful to them for. When Tom Barrows broke his hip, they made sure his hay got in, and Bert milked for Ed Donohue while he was having that chemotherapy he had to have. They're real good neighbors.

"Of course, they always carried too much money. They always had a wad of bills rolled up in their back pockets. Always. I warned them about it, but they just laughed at me. But nobody needed to hurt them like that. If they'd just asked, they would have given them the money. It wasn't important to them. They had more than they needed. There was no need to do that to them."

She blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes as we pulled up to the hospital, then she turned and looked right at me.

"What kind of person does a thing like that? Am I going to have to start fearing for my life every time I cash my paycheck or happen to be alone in the house?"

"I don't know, Ma'am," I said. And then I had an idea. "Did you say they *always* carried that money? Even in the barn?"

"Even in the barn."

The woman at the information desk told us that both brothers were still in surgery, so I decided to leave. The conversation with Mrs. Strout had given me an idea I wanted to get to work on. I left her in good hands. She seemed to know everyone at the hospital. Last I saw, two women were embracing her and leading her off to the coffee shop.

The next day I stopped by to interview Herbert Neal. His younger brother Chet was still in the coma and the doctors kept saying they didn't think he'd come out of it. But Bert was sitting up in bed when I got there. He was a big man—even in bed he looked big. Just like his niece said, he had a full head of black hair, cut in a crewcut. His face was black-and-blue and his eyes were almost swollen shut, but

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his handshake was firm. I could see that the effort cost him, though—his arm trembled as he leaned back against the pillow.

"Just tell me what you remember," I told him.

"We were coming back from the barn," he said. "We'd finished milking and Chet was gonna cook up some beans and wieners. Two young fellas were coming up the drive. Their car was down by the curve, partway off the road. It was green—Chet called it 'seen-better-days green.' "

Bert's huge calloused fingers had been rhythmically stroking the top sheet where it was folded across his chest, but he suddenly stopped. "You know Chet has one blue eye and one brown eye? He's an unusual fellow. They say he might not live." He turned his massive head away and looked at the wall.

"What happened then?" I asked gently.

"These fellas wanted to use the phone. I said we could pull 'em out with the tractor, have 'em back on the road in no time, but they said they had to use the phone. It was okay with us, so we walked together to the house. I got up on the porch and was opening the door when one of 'em hit me in the middle of the back and pushed me in. I fell down on the floor and he was kicking and punching me. That's all I remember. Next thing I knew I was here."

He turned his face back to me. "Do you think you'll catch 'em?" he asked.

"Could you identify them?"

"I'm pretty sure I could. They were young and tough-looking and the one had an earring. A gold ring in his ear, imagine that."

"Well, I sent out a bulletin yesterday and I'm expecting some results real soon," I assured him.

His description verified what I already knew. Young punks, country style. The fact is that most violent crimes are committed by young males. They all tell the same story. They need the money for booze or drugs, or they want to look tough for their friends or to impress a girl friend. There's a lot of them out there just waiting for an excuse to explode. These guys are never too smart. I knew we'd pick 'em up.

It all went just the way I thought it would. Within a day, I was on their trail. Reports had come in from bars and liquor stores in the area and, sure enough, I was there for the arrest when they stumbled out of a country-western place on Route 17. Bert identified

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them, but we could have made the case even without his positive ID.

The judge was tough for once and sent them to the state penitentiary for fifteen to twenty years. Poor old Chet died, so it was manslaughter, plus larceny and assault. Last I heard, Bert sold the farm and was working over at the Co-Hen egg farm. He's doing okay.

And I've got to admit it was satisfying to be able to make the case stick. Gave me a real good feeling. It was the evidence. Even their lawyer couldn't argue it away, and it didn't need to be explained by any expert witness. It was overwhelming, I'll tell you. Two rolls of money, two thick wads of paper, each holding over a thousand dollars smelling to high heaven.

Let's face it, you can't spend all your time in a barn without smelling like one. Even your money. And those rolls of bills smelled just like a barn. Just like a barn.

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Row 1 L-R Rebecca Tarvin, Margaret Carr, Kerry Fandrich, Leslie Kalin, Heather Abendroth, Betty Oakes, Ethel Flach, Christina Erickson, Sandy Klas

Row 2 L-R Dorothy Bell, Barbara McIntyre, Virginia Ragsdale, Helen Ekhardt, Dolores Whiteside, Belinda Isaacs, Lois Glenn Wolfe, Deborah Ann Groff, Mary Stage, Mary Ellen Clifford

Row 3 L-R Marjorie Fox, Morgan Rushing, Florence Artery, Annamae Watt, Gerald Bell, Erma Bleizeffer, Dorothy Axell, Pat Hoch, Rose Margherio, Cynthia Manson, Diane Crenshaw, Stephen Buehler, C. Jean Ogle, John Oakes, Bob Oakes, Patricia Reibert, Richard Carr, Elaine Abendroth, Doris Cassiday, Bernice Carr, Bruce Cassiday, Richard Carr, Jr., Sherri Bowling, Tamara Prather, Don Fenwick, Lou Ann Pasquan, Marky Fenwick

Row 4 L-R Mike Horn, James Ragsdale, Gerald McIntyre, Ed Hoch, Bill Crenshaw, George E. Whiteside, "Red" Ekhardt, Inspector MacPherson, Al Bleideffer, Walter Stage, Jeff Faville, Susan Paterson

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A *NEW* short story by

REGINALD BRETNOR

The mysterious appeal read, "Write in this square the name of the dearest Defunct; for this Defunct the orphan boys will pray in a special way. If you wish, you can stick also the Defunct's photography and send it us."

In the September 1971 issue, we published "A Matter of Equine Ballistics," an earlier story about Alastair Alexandrovitch Timuroff, dealer in antique arms. Nineteen years later, he is ensconced in his little shop of muskets and fowling pieces, claymores and katanas and sabers, belt-buckle knives, boot daggers, and things, all antiques, no reproductions . . .

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE DEAREST DEFUNCT

by REGINALD BRETNOR

Alastair Alexandrovitch Timuroff looked up from the cheap little grey envelope with its Italian stamp at his friend, Lieutenant Peter Cominazzo of the Homicide Bureau, who had just presented it to him. "The emotional Russian in me," he said, "tells me that the Orfanotrofio Sant'Antonio is an institution probably run by some religious order and dedicated to charitable works. The prudent Scot in me, who I confess is now dominant, tells me that this is an appeal for funds."

His secretary Olivia, Lieutenant Cominazzo's wife, giggled. "You're right on both counts," she told him. "That's why Pete's trying to push it off on you, even though it's from his own countrymen. Who'd think a great big six-footer would stoop to anything so low?"

"What do you mean, *my* countrymen? Me, born right here in San

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Francisco? Anyhow, they're Sicilianos, and my folks came from way up north, from Brescia. Go ahead, open it up, read it. But first take a gander at who it's addressed to."

Timuroff had not looked at the address. Now he did, and the scar that ran from the corner of his trim moustache to his Tartar cheekbone twitched very slightly. "What the devil? Signor Willis Ganymede. How on earth did our brave little supervisor get on their mailing list?"

"Don't ask me, Tim. I don't know how Minky Ganymede gets on anything. Look inside."

Rather gingerly, Timuroff removed the contents: a return envelope and a slip of printed paper.

The first side cried out:

HEED!

and continued I), II), III), IV) with instructions as to how remittances should be sent. It ended up:

With best thanks and wishes,
We are
The orphan boys of Sant'Antonio

"Well," commented Timuroff, "I must say I'm surprised to find Signor Ganymede interesting himself in such a worthy project."

"Turn it over," Pete told him.

Timuroff obeyed. He frowned and read aloud:

"Write in this square the name of the dearest Defunct; for this Defunct the orphan boys will pray in a special way.

"If you wish, you can stick also the Defunct's photography and send it us."

"It sounds a little coarse, doesn't it?" Timuroff murmured. "And here, just under his 'photography,' is the Defunct's name, Cesare Spirella—whoever he was. Not the sort you'd want to meet in a back alley late at night. My word! Here's a name I know—one of my customers, Mrs. Lydia Hanuman, and the amount she's sending: fifty dollars. All very picturesque and interesting, but—"

"Ha," Pete broke in, "you may well say *but*."

Timuroff looked at him inquiringly.

"Cesare may very well have been our Minky's dearest—though I'd never have thought it of him—but defunct he's *not*.

"Cheesy Spirella's a Mafia soldier—a hitman. In his trade, a guy can become a defunct any time. The question is, how did Minky know he was scheduled to be wiped? And how come he's willing to

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pass the word along to this Mrs. Hanuman so she can pungle up fifty bucks for prayers?"

"It's very strange indeed," Timuroff said thoughtfully. "Ganymede, you may recall, was the most beautiful boy ever born, whereupon old Zeus, who relished that sort of pulchritude, sent an eagle to kidnap him up to Olympus to serve as his—well, cup-bearer. All this was probably of value to our supervisor during his early stage career as a female impersonator, and we can, I think, conclude that he was not born Ganymede. Then we have Lydia Hanuman, the wife of Briscoe Hanuman the lawyer, who is full of money and collects Near Eastern swords of various kinds."

Timuroff gestured at the racks of antique weapons which were his stock in trade. "He waves them around ferociously before he buys them, making the most frightful faces. Didn't Olivia mention him?"

"I just didn't connect the names," Olivia said. "So he has a wife? Slave girls seemed more likely."

"I've met her several times, and a handsome bit of work she is, though somewhat on the splashy, slightly poisonous side, with a wild eye for the boys and a firm belief that she's a jet-setter—" Timuroff closed his eyes for an instant, frowning.

"Tim," said Pete, "your body language tells me a light just turned on. Am I right?"

"You are, you are. First we have Willis Ganymede. Then we encounter Briscoe Hanuman. Hanuman may or may not be his real name—he has rather a Punic look about him—but it is the name of the Hindu monkey-god, born of a strange coupling between a monkey and a breeze. So here we have a Greek boy-god, a Hindu monkey-god—or at least his wife—and a Mafia soldier all mixed up together, with the first two wangling prayers for the third from a Catholic orphanage in Sicily."

"I don't figure it."

"Nor I. It could be coincidence—or should I say synchronicity? Two godlings out of three is just too many, but in the San Francisco we have today anything is possible. Just where did Mr. Ganymede happen to lose this little souvenir?"

"At the Gay Sensitivity Day celebration, I guess when Mayor Verdugo was making his stirring speech. Terry Horikawa, who was protecting His Honor, found it and turned it in to me. He figured I'd be interested because Cheesy was involved."

"Well, then, don't you think you ought to sniff around and see if there are any other minor deities in the woodwork?"

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Peter snorted. "I've got enough with homicides that have already happened. What makes you think this god deal's important?"

"I heard a little bell ring." Timuroff smiled. "And I have faith in little bells. So just this once I'll be happy to look into the matter for you."

"*I* think that's very nice of you," said Olivia loyally. "Are you still going to take us both to lunch?"

They lunched at Oliver's, in the old financial district, and though they spoke of all sorts of other matters—about Pete's putative ancestor, the great gunmaker Lazarino Cominazzo, and how Timuroff's Liselotte Cantelou was triumphing at the Vienna Staatsoper —Timuroff's mind was trying to uncover what his little mental bell had hinted at.

He returned to his shop alone, after giving Olivia the afternoon off to go shopping. The premises had once been occupied by a dishonest furrier who, in escaping, had abandoned the infinity of mirrors behind his glass wall cases, making it seem as if the number of Timuroff's muskets and fowling pieces, claymores and katanas and sabers was absolutely unlimited.

He turned on his stereo, and found himself listening to Holst's *The Planets*, which seemed to fit in with people also named after gods and godlings. He sat back, cudgeling his brains, and presently a bell did ring—the one informing him a customer had arrived. Sighing, he pressed the button that unlocked the door and called, "Come in."

As he stood up, Lydia Hanuman swept in with a flourish.

Well, well, he thought. Synchronicity with a vengeance!

Everything about Mrs. Hanuman was expensive. Indeed it was difficult to look at her without seeing price-tags—in her made-to-be-modeled dress in the latest trendy fashion, in her hat, her startling jewels, even her white, white teeth, her raven hair, her flashing jet-black eyes, and the cloud of perfume in which she swam.

She saw that Olivia was out and beamed at him. "*Dear* Tim," she purred. "You don't mind my calling you Tim, do you? Briscoe always does. Oh, I'm so glad we're alone!"

Muttering something politely unintelligible, Timuroff showed her to a chair.

"And Briscoe says you're so hospitable—you always offer him a drink. I hope you'll offer me one, too. I'm *parched.*"

She leaned forward and touched his cheek with a shapely finger.

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"I simply *love* your scar," she murmured. "It's so *masculine*. It gets awfully lonely," she said wistfully, "being married to a successful lawyer. Do you have any tequila?"

"I do indeed," replied Timuroff, he hoped not too maliciously, "and I also have the recipe for a really splendid drink—unless you're driving."

She shook her head. "In San Francisco? Never! I always take a cab."

"Good," he said. "Then I'll make you one. A jigger of brandy, a jigger of tequila, a highball glass, and you fill it with chilled champagne." He compounded it and gave it to her with a bow.

She smiled up at him, a hungry smile rather than a thirsty one. "It sounds absolutely *nourishing*."

"Oh, it is." He mixed himself a cautious brandy and soda and sat down again.

She drank, and he took a symbolic sip. She rolled her eyes, and somehow he was reminded of an accomplished belly-dancer. "Why, it's delicious!" she exclaimed. "So *smooth*—like champagne with a lovely electric charge in it. Do you suppose I could have another when I've finished?"

"It packs quite a punch," he said dubiously.

"Oh, *please*. You see—Tim dear, I came here on a very painful errand."

"You mean you aren't shopping for a special present for Briscoe?"

"No—" she held her glass out for a refill "—it's for my little brother. He's a—well, you might say he's a bill collector. And, Tim, it's *such* a dangerous way to make a living."

Suddenly a great light dawned. Timuroff found himself comparing her features with the remembered countenance of Cesare Spirella. She was striking, if not exactly beautiful. Mr. Spirella was neither. But there was no doubt about the resemblance.

Any qualms he might have harbored regarding the wisdom of getting Mrs. Hanuman drunk dissolved immediately, and he refilled her glass. "Who does he collect bills for?" he asked.

"I don't know exactly. It's—well, some of them even call it the *family*, can you imagine that? Anyway, his job's terribly dangerous—" she put a hand to her eyes "—so I—I'd like him to be as well armed as possible, to—to defend himself."

"I don't sell modern weapons, Mrs. Hanuman."

"Oh, he's got access to plenty of those. What I want is *sneakies*—you know, belt-buckle knives and boot daggers and things."

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"Mine are all antiques," he told her. "You'd save a lot by buying new ones, replicas."

"No, no! In Sicily, tradition is everything—" She downed the second drink and indicated that she could absorb a third. "Let me tell you our story," she declared. "Our papa was killed by horrible men. Our mama had gone far away. I, six years old, was adopted by good people from this great city, distant relatives. But because they could take only one, my poor brother was put into an orphanage. The kind fathers wanted him to study for the priesthood, but he said never—his blood was too hot. He would live to avenge Papa. All this I heard when we were reunited, seven years ago. He already had this good job, for the family, and still he hunted the evil men who killed Papa. He deserves the best, Tim! So perhaps you have a poison dagger, maybe one that belonged to Lucrezia Borgia?"

Timuroff, amazed at her ability to hold her liquor, handed her a third. "I'm afraid I have no weapons with such an illustrious provenance," he told her. "And any poison would have to be applied by you. The police get very nasty about such matters."

"Bah!" she exclaimed. "The police—always meddling."

Timuroff decided the time had come to show her his stock in trade. To his amazement, she rose and followed him quite steadily, handling each blade lovingly, speculating on the damage it might do to Papa's murderers or people who didn't want their bills collected.

She wound up purchasing three—a wicked gambler's push-dagger from New Orleans, an ornate Seventeenth Century Italian blade, and a small Indian scissors-katar, designed to make mincemeat of the innards of anyone unlucky enough to have it poked into him.

While Timuroff wrapped them, she sipped her drink, looked at him longingly, and spoke sentimentally of her little brother. "Can you imagine?" she said. "Poor Cesare, with all those people threatening him, he still has to offend Mr. Wotan!"

"Who?" said Timuroff.

Belatedly, she clapped a hand over her mouth. "Oh, I shouldn't have— It's something secret! Well, anyhow—" she fortified herself with another swallow "—Mr. Wotan is head of the little church Briscoe and I belong to. Tim, you of all people should join us. It's so *exclusive*. I myself will recommend you to Mr. Wotan."

"I'm really not much of a joiner," Timuroff replied.

"Neither is my poor little brother," she said unhappily. "That's probably why he insulted Mr. Wotan." She actually shuddered. "He

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should never have brought Mr. Wotan's wrath down on him. Those other people just have guns, but *he* can hurl thunderbolts."

She fished a small paperbound volume from her purse and presented it to Timuroff. WE ARE GODS! proclaimed the cover. YOU TOO CAN BE THE GOD OF YOUR CHOICE! The price was $25.00.

"Did your Mr. Wotan write this?"

"Of course. His full name is the Lord God Jehovah Wotan, but we just call him Mr. Wotan—except during serious rituals, naturally. But what it says is true. It's why Briscoe's been so successful since he discovered he *is* Hanuman, that wonderful Hindu god who can outsmart anyone."

"And you, of course, are a goddess."

"Oh, yes—and such an interesting one." She blushed as she said it. "Mr. Wotan and Briscoe both forbade me to tell who—but, Tim dear, if *you'd* like to know—"

"Wouldn't that incur Divine Wrath?"

"There is that," she said regretfully.

"Tell me—" Timuroff bridged the gap "—are you all required to change your names?"

"Oh, no. Mr. Wotan prefers some of us who do to move to other cities, to avoid vulgar gossip. Remember, Tim, our Pantheon is very small, very select."

"There's a supervisor named Willis Ganymede. Would he be one of you?"

"Oh, yes—he's a dear, dear friend. He was in that orphanage with Cesare, though then he wasn't even Willis, and he left long before Cesare did. He has certain tendencies, you understand? The fathers did not approve." She looked down at her now empty glass. "Tim, dear, do you suppose—?"

At that point, mercifully, Olivia returned early, package-laden. "Did I interrupt anything?" she asked.

"*Yes, dear,*" replied Mrs. Hanuman in a tone which would have served to envenom a Borgia dagger, "you did." She did not quite say *yes,* but her voice was thickening and Olivia came instantly to the rescue.

"Tim," she said, "I'm not trying to rush anything, but didn't you have a three-thirty appointment with the CHP captain who collects Civil War?"

"I'd clean forgotten," Timuroff exclaimed. "I was having such an interesting chat with Lydia here."

Mrs. Hanuman favored him with a lush smile, glared at Olivia,

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and said, "Tim, will you be a shwee—a sweetheart and tell your girl to summon me a cab?"

"I hate to have you go," he lied. "Do say hello to Briscoe for me." He winked at Olivia, already at the phone.

Having made the call, she tactfully busied herself at a filing cabinet while he took Mrs. Hanuman by the elbow and escorted her to the elevator. He rode down with her, saw her safely into a cab, and cleverly evaded a goodbye kiss.

Back at the shop, Olivia looked at him disapprovingly. "Tim," she said, "what *were* you doing with Medusa?"

"Selling her pretty toys for her baby brother." He smiled. "And she's not Medusa. She's a goddess. She told me so herself."

"Come again?"

He proceeded to tell her all he knew about the Lord God Jehovah Wotan's exclusive little church, and she shook her head unbelievingly.

"So being Mrs. Monkey-God makes her a goddess, too?"

"Oh, no—she's a goddess in her own right. But she wouldn't tell me who."

"How on earth can successful, prosperous, presumably intelligent people fall for such nonsense?"

"Because high IQs don't necessarily imply good sense, and playing god is pretty heady stuff. Remember that Rajneesh up in Oregon with all the Rolls-Royces? Anyhow, Lydia really did appreciate the weapons I sold her. She thinks they'll help keep her baby brother from becoming the dearest defunct."

"Hey, do you actually mean that ugly character in the photo is her *brother?* Just wait till Pete hears this! He'll be quoting Shakespeare for half an hour."

"Well, we still don't know who's out to get Cesare, but she did give me one possible opening. She invited me to become a god—" he pointed at the paperback "—and promised to speak to Mr. Wotan for me. I might be more tempted if I were twenty years younger. Some of those gods had a riproaring time."

"Look," said Olivia, "can all this be serious?"

Timuroff chuckled. "Serious enough so Pete'll be happy to pick up our dinner check just to hear my full report and listen to my sage advice."

"I can see," said Olivia, "that if you do become the god of your choice—I tremble to think of it—you won't be a benign, kindly, generous god . . ."

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Pete arrived just after closing time, accepted the drink they offered him, and listened to Timuroff's account.

"See how it pays not to be a cop?" he said to Olivia. "How would the world treat me if I got a goddess drunk, especially one married to a monkey-smart lawyer? To say nothing of that awful potion he got her drunk on."

"She liked it," protested Timuroff, "and she held it admirably, aside from getting a little thick of speech and being bitchy to Olivia."

"Well," Pete said, "your hunch about all those gods certainly panned out. But now what? It's funny nobody in the Department's looked into this L. G. J. Wotan's activities."

"You don't suppose someone in your top echelons became the god of his choice without telling anyone, do you?" Timuroff smiled. "Remember, Mr. Wotan doesn't require them to change their names."

Pete shuddered. "That little possibility boggles the mind. I wonder who gave Minky the notion that his pal Cheesy was in danger. Did Mrs. Goddess Hanuman tip him off? Hell, I don't know *where* to start."

"*I* do," declared Olivia. "Over dinner tonight, which my boss thinks you, dear husband, should pay for, we can decide which obscure and unpleasant god he wants to be—probably one interested in weapons-making. If he was a woman, he could be Inari, the Fox Goddess, who helped the great smith Munechika forge the famous blade known as the Little Fox."

Timuroff smiled. "At present I have no real intention of aspiring to godhood. However, if I do decide to beard Mr. Wotan in his den, perhaps we ought to leave the choice to him. Such an act of proper reverence would please dear Lydia tremendously."

"You mean you may go see this character and let him think you're joining up?" Pete warmed to the idea.

"I'll admit I'm curious. They probably throw positively Olympian parties. Let's try the phonebook."

Olivia produced it and flipped pages. "No dice," she said.

"How about Information?"

She dialed.

"Wotan, L. G. Jehovah?" echoed the operator. "That number is unlisted by request of the subscriber."

"The line to Heaven or Valhalla or whatever is top secret," Olivia told them, hanging up. "We'll have to rely on Mrs. Bitchy."

"Well," Timuroff said, "I still have a lot of champagne, brandy,

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and tequila. I'll give you another afternoon off. By the way, do you think this office needs a daybed?"

"I'm going to call Liselotte right away and lower the boom on her faithless lover," vowed Olivia.

"And lose your job?" said Pete.

During dinner Tim answered Pete's many questions, and finally decided to accept Mrs. Hanuman's offer to introduce him to Wotan. "Of course," he told them, "I'll wait until she's had time to recover from today's libations."

"And to forgive you for providing them," said Olivia.

However, just after ten the next morning, when Mrs. Hanuman surprised them with a phonecall, her voice carried no hint of hangover. She spoke almost pleasantly to Olivia when she asked for Tim, and her gifts, she told him, had really touched her little brother's heart. He was disappointed because there was no poison dagger, but his delight at the scissor-katar more than compensated for it. When Timuroff informed her he was considering joining Mr. Wotan's charmed circle, she insisted they celebrate by having lunch together—she'd put it on Briscoe's account at Alexis' Tangier.

With some difficulty, Timuroff begged off—he said he was waiting for two overseas calls, but that he'd call Mr. Wotan as soon as she gave the word. And what was Mr. Wotan's phone number? And how was one to address him?

She warned him solemnly not to let anyone else know any of this and to wait until he heard from her. Plain Mr. Wotan, she said, would do over the phone, but once in the Presence, he would expect to be called All-Father. "And soon we can have lunch together?" she said coyly. "Or perhaps supper? Dear Briscoe's going to L.A. on Tuesday and he won't be back until very late Wednesday."

As Timuroff hung up, Olivia looked at him inquiringly and he repeated the conversation back to her.

"You ought to be ashamed, Tim," she said. "Leading that poor innocent little goddess on like that. You know perfectly well you've no intention of having lunch with her, let alone an all-night supper in Briscoe's absence."

"Don't be too sure," he told her. "We gods have different standards from common clay."

Half an hour later, Mrs. Hanuman called to tell him she'd spoken to Mr. Wotan. "His Valkyries," she said, "told me if it had been

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anyone but me he wouldn't have taken the time to answer. But when I told him about you and how eager you were and about all your weapons, he said he'd spare you a few minutes if you'll be there promptly at four this afternoon. Will you?"

"Absolutely," he promised her.

He passed the word to Olivia. "This may make me a bit late," he told her, "so when Pete calls for you, ask him to wait."

At precisely five minutes to four, he drew up before an ostentatious older house across from Golden Gate Park, rang the bell, and was not really surprised when the door was opened by two statuesque blondes garbed in byrnies, wearing winged helmets, and looking as though they had just arrived from Central Casting.

They escorted him through a sumptuous hallway into what must in earlier times have been an oversized dining room but was now a surprisingly functional office. It still had a long table with chairs ranged along it, but it also contained three large steel filing cabinets and two desks of the same material, on one of which reposed an ultra-modern computer. There was also a vast fireplace.

But the one object suggesting an other-than-everyday atmosphere was a barbaric throne at one end of the room. Two snarling boars' heads looked down disapprovingly over its occupant, who, Timuroff realized, could be none other than the Lord God Jehovah Wotan. He was a mighty figure of a man, with a great, grizzled beard, a black patch over one eye, and an ominous frown. He, too, wore helm and byrnie, but his helm, instead of wings, bore fearsome horns, and he wore leather breeks. On his lap lay a battleaxe at which Timuroff stared unbelievingly, recognizing it as Scandinavian, probably Eleventh or Twelfth Century, of superb workmanship, and in astoundingly fine condition.

"All-Father, this is Alastair Alexandrovitch Timuroff," announced one of the Valkyries with a hint of an accent more Cockney than Norse, "the supplicant."

"Bring him a chair!" boomed Mr. Wotan, raising a huge silver-mounted horn and drinking from it. "And fetch more mead!"

The chair was brought and Alastair was seated. One of the Valkyries replenished Wotan's horn from a silver pitcher.

"That's a very handsome battleaxe, All-Father," said Timuroff respectfully.

Mr. Wotan hefted it disapprovingly. "It's okay, I guess," he answered, "but it's too damn small. For me, that is. Say, you deal in this sort of stuff, don't you?"

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"I do." Timuroff nodded. "And I have one in stock right now that's almost twice as big—and very handsome. It's not as old, though."

"That doesn't matter. Would you take this one in trade?"

"Of course," said Timuroff.

"Giving me some boot?"

"How about three hundred?" suggested Timuroff.

"Make it five and we've got a deal."

Alastair agreed.

"Mr. Thoth!" Wotan bellowed.

From a side door appeared a strange being, a man in an ordinary business suit but wearing a bird's head, through which his small black eyes peered glitteringly. The bird's head had a long, seemingly very sharp beak.

"This," said the All-Father, "is the god Thoth, my accountant. In ancient Egypt, he was the god of the arts and sciences, of scribes and mathematics."

"I shall ask you a few questions," said Thoth, pecking the air with his ibis beak. "Answer truthfully. Remember—you can hide nothing from us."

"Right," said the All-Father, wiping mead from his whiskers with a huge and hairy hand. "Our eyes are everywhere. The mass media, the Police Department, even the IRS."

"So if you have a criminal record," continued Mr. Thoth, "don't try to hide it from us."

"My criminal record," Timuroff said, "consists of only a few parking tickets."

"And don't try to conceal your assets," added Mr. Thoth. He produced a clipboard and—his voice uncannily shrill and birdlike—proceeded to ask the questions one might have to answer to get a job with the CIA, adopt a child, or secure an exorbitant mortgage on a nine-hundred-thousand-dollar residence. Timuroff answered promptly, drawing on his fertile imagination. Something told him that, with Lydia Hanuman backing him, the only checking the gods would do would be with a local bank or two and his very solid credit-card accounts.

"Good, good!" approved Wotan.

Mr. Thoth produced a large parchment. "These are the Lord God Jehovah Wotan's Commandments. Memorize and destroy them!"

Timuroff read them:

"I. It is the Lord God Jehovah Allah Wotan, ruler of heaven and earth, to whom you owe absolute fealty and obedience.

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"II. Even if in ages past men worshiped you, thou shalt accept no worshipers but shalt content thyself with those powers and privileges given you by the aforesaid Lord God Wotan.

III. Thou shalt not practice or condone human sacrifice, nor the blood sacrifice of any living creature, other than such horses as may be ritually sacrificed to my kinsman Thor. (Timuroff, a one-time cavalryman, was horrified.)

IV. Thou shalt never violate flagrantly the customs of this Age, for the Lord God Jehovah Allah Wotan watches you, his thunderbolts in readiness.

V. Thou shalt at once report any of thy transgressions to the god Thoth for appropriate punishment, all payments to be made in full immediately. I, your Lord God Jehovah Allah Wotan, have spoken."

"Is that clear?" asked Mr. Thoth.

"Clear as crystal."

"And there is nothing to which you take objection?"

"Perish the thought."

"Timuroff," thundered the All-Father, "you are a discerning man." He lifted his great drinking-horn, and Timuroff saw that on his arm was tattooed a faded Marine Corps emblem and *Semper Fidelis*. His opinion of him immediately went up several notches.

"Now," said Mr. Wotan, "if you pass all Mr. Thoth's tests, which god would you care to become?"

"I'd rather hoped for Thor. Is he taken?"

"By two or three people, though you might persuade them to contend with you for it."

"In that case, could I be Huitzilopochtli?"

"*Who?*"

"I'm sure you know him, All-Father—the Aztec god of war."

The All-Father harrumphed. Of course he knew him, but wasn't he sort of a dirty bastard, what with hearts ripped out on stone altars and other abominations?

"That was then," said Timuroff. "Now he's really kindly."

"Well, we can give it a try. Anyhow, you have my approval, Huitzi-whatever. Sigrid, honey, will you wrap this chopper up for the gentleman?"

Timuroff thanked the All-Father, promised to do his best in his new persona, and, having received the axe neatly wrapped in brown paper, allowed the Valkyries to escort him to the door.

"Hey," growled Mr. Wotan, "don't forget to give Thoth your check on the way out."

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Timuroff wrote a check to cover the five hundred for the axe plus his several-hundred-dollar initiation fee and an additional sum for miscellaneous charges and services. "I'll send your new axe over first thing in the morning," he promised.

Just as Thoth opened the door for him, the phone rang and a Valkyrie answered it. She signaled to Mr. Wotan, looking troubled. "What'll I tell him? It's that son of a bitch in Vegas again."

Timuroff didn't hear the reply, for the door was hastily slammed shut behind him.

By the time he got back to the shop, Olivia had already closed for the day.

"Where's Pete?" he asked.

"He called about twenty minutes ago, all excited, and said to be sure we both wait for him. I guess something really big's happened. And now what will it be, Your Godness? Nectar or ambrosia on the rocks?"

"Neither one." He put down his package. "More likely a beaker of blood. Soon I shall be Huitzilopochtli, the Aztec god of war, and a more bloodthirsty fellow you can't imagine. And it's costing me a pretty penny, too, though luckily I was able to trade Mr. Wotan out of a genuine Norse axe from the Eleventh or Twelfth Century, of superb quality. Don't let me forget to send him one of those two nice German replicas—the big ones—that's part of the bargain."

"I'm relieved," she said. "That sounds more like the old Timuroff. I won't have to lock up the obsidian knives, after all."

She was handing him his brandy and soda when Pete arrived.

"Tim!" he burst out. "Say, is your girl friend going to be upset!"

"I think he means Medusa," explained Olivia.

"That's right, her. Well, that baby brother of hers, Cheesy, has finally become a defunct—deader than a doornail."

"Oh, dear, I *am* sorry," Olivia said. "She did seem really fond of him. What happened?"

"They found him less than an hour ago. He was behind a tall mess of bushes in the park, and it looked like Paul Bunyan or somebody had taken a double-bitted axe to him. He wasn't split quite to the chin, but it was close. It looked like Cheesy'd been lying in wait. Anyhow, there was a twenty-two auto with a silencer, a typical Mafia execution weapon, with one shot out of it by his body."

"When did this happen?" asked Timuroff, frowning at his package, at which Olivia, too, was staring, open-mouthed.

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"Sometime last night, says the M.D." Pete saw the expression on their faces. "Hey, what cooks?"

Timuroff stood up and unwrapped the battleaxe. "I made a trade with L. G. J. Wotan," he said.

"Tim, you do come up with the damndest things! They found Cheesy not ten minutes from where Wotan has his heaven!"

Timuroff picked up the axe and fondled it lovingly. "So I suppose your lab men will want to take this and ruin it with their corrosive chemicals, looking for poor Cheesy's blood and brains."

"You know damn well none of our boys'll do it any harm."

"I hope not," said Timuroff. "It's a mistaken idea that all Vikings were crude, simple-minded sea-rovers and looters. They had great artisans among them."

"And it's worth a great deal of money," added Olivia. "Tim, make him give you a detailed receipt for it."

"Don't worry," said Pete, "we'll keep it no longer than we have to. We already have Minky Ganymede down at the station being grilled about how he knew Cheesy was slated to become a defunct, and I've a hunch what he says will be very interesting, involving all sorts of gods, to say nothing of goddesses like the one whose check was in Minky's envelope. Now, how about telling us about *your* afternoon?"

Timuroff did that, describing Wotan, his staff, and his establishment. "They'll let me know tomorrow whether I can be Huitzi, as Wotan affectionately put it, but now I imagine my transfiguration may be postponed indefinitely."

"Well," said Pete, "I'd best be getting back. By this time, Minky ought to be spilling everything he knows. Will you give Olivia a lift home for me?"

"I'll do better—I'll treat her to dinner. I forgot to mention that Mr. Wotan boasted he has gods planted everywhere—the IRS and the Police Department included."

"That's all we need," Pete grunted. "A nice pagan god loose in our command structure. Well, if I get back soon enough, maybe I can keep him from protecting Minky. I'll let you know."

No sooner had he left than the phone rang. Olivia answered it. "It's Briscoe Hanuman. He says it's important."

Timuroff sighed, not knowing whether Hanuman was going to sue him for alienation of affections or challenge him to a duel.

"You heard the news?" Hanuman demanded stridently. "They've murdered Cheesy—he's Lydia's baby brother and she's fit to be tied.

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I thought I'd warn you. She's got the hots for you, so she may come camp on your doorstep. That drink you made her sounded swell—I'd like to try it myself sometime. Anyhow, she told me you're joining up with us gods. Don't let anybody talk you out of it. Believe me, it works. Since I decided I'd be this Hanuman character, I can outfox any team of lawyers in California. Anyway, when you see Lydia, kiss her for me and try to get her calmed down a bit. I'd sure appreciate it. Sleep tight."

He hung up, and so did Timuroff. "I'll be a *soukinsin!*" he told Olivia. "That's son of a bitch in Russian. Briscoe told me his wife has what he called 'the hots' for me, and would I kindly do what I could to soothe her fevered brow. Let's get out of here before—"

The phone rang again, and Olivia picked it up automatically. "Hello?"

"You listen!" shouted Mrs. Hanuman. "I want to talk to Tim! And don't you dare tell me he's not in!"

Resignedly, Timuroff reached for the phone.

"They've murdered my Cesare!" she wailed. "In cold blood!" She wept over the phone, then abruptly burst out, "Tim, you're a brave man, not a lawyer! You must *kill* the man who murdered my little brother! For me, you must do this! Think what we can do together afterward. Do you promise?"

"My dear Lydia, we don't even know who did it."

"*I* know. It was those people in Las Vegas! They're animals! They think because I'm a goddess my brother is protecting Mr. Wotan, so they murder him. They're afraid of Mr. Wotan while Cesare is alive. You understand?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Bah! Why are men so stupid? Almost every week Mr. Wotan goes to Vegas and gambles. He never wears his eyepatch or his helmet. He goes as an ordinary man. But they know he is a god and cannot lose, so they hate him! They think that if Cesare dies, it's easier to kill him. They do not know that he can't be killed by hitmen. We, you and I, can go together and find the murderer!"

More weeping followed, along with more oaths of vengeance, and finally, when Timuroff promised vaguely to do everything he could, she rendered her impassioned thanks and renewed pledges of future raptures.

"Phew!" he said, hanging up. "You know what this sounds like to me?"

"I can guess," replied Olivia. "The All-Father started going to

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Vegas and, like us common clods, started losing, and they gave him credit and got deeper and deeper into him. When he either couldn't or wouldn't pay, they began threatening and eventually put out a contract on him."

"And who do you suppose their hitman was?"

"Little Cheesy, of course. He probably accepted his sister's invitation to look over the god bit—it gave him a chance to case the joint, then he lost his temper when the All-Father said the wrong thing to him."

"Bright girl. By this time, Minky should have turned himself inside out, and I'll give odds he'll prove you right. But what will I do about Lydia Hanuman? I thought all I'd have to contend with would be a woman scorned and a jealous husband. Now she wants me to take a starring role in a Sicilian vendetta, and the husband turns out not to be jealous, after all. Any ideas?"

"Yes," Olivia answered. "First, we have dinner. Then you drive me home and we'll hear what Pete has learned."

They had a quiet and pleasant dinner at Mayes' Oyster House on Polk Street, keeping the conversation to neutral subjects, and when they arrived at the Cominazzo apartment in the Marina they found Pete already there with three glasses of Courvoisier already poured.

"Do you mean," said Timuroff, "that Cheesy tried to kill Wotan and the All-Father beat him to the draw?"

"How did you guess? After I came back with that axe, Minky really blabbed—all about Wotan's gambling, and the phonecalls from Vegas, and what it was Cheesy said to him. He called him a deadbeat and stomped out of Valhalla."

"So now I suppose you have the All-Father safely in the jug?"

"No way. There's no doubt it was self-defense. Because it was a lovely spring night, he went for a walk in the park with that chick calling herself Sigrid, him with his Wotan outfit and the axe just in case of muggers. And Cheesy, who'd been watching out of his parked car, slipped in around them to where there was a clump of bamboo. Wotan told me himself. 'Hell, the little bastard oughtn't to have picked bamboo to hide in,' he said. 'In my two–three years in 'Nam I learned what kind of noise bushwhackers make in bamboo, and believe me the Cong were a lot better at it than he was. So I told my girl here to keep on walking and talking like I was still with her, and I snuck around behind him. Sure enough, there he was. He got off one shot, but it went wild, and then I had him. Well, I went

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back to Sigrid, who'd done just as I told her, and she said we'd have to call you cops. So I said okay, and she phoned you."

Pete shook his head unbelievingly. "She called 911 the minute they got back, and couldn't get anyone to pay attention. She gave her right name and address and everything, but when she said somebody had tried to murder the Lord God Jehovah and been righteously smitten by the All-Father's axe, they asked her to repeat it, then wanted to know what she'd been snorting and told her to sack in—she'd feel better in the morning. Anyhow, at that point Mr. Wotan, who was busy cleaning off his axe, said the hell with it, let them find him themselves. So we checked last night's tapes and damned if it wasn't exactly like he'd said."

"Our Mrs. Hanuman's going to be awfully hard to convince," said Timuroff. "Not that Cheesy's a defunct—she knows that—but that he was the hitman. She has it the other way around. She's sure Cheesy was protecting Wotan from the mob." He related the substance of his conversation with her. "Frankly," he said, "I don't think she's quite in her right mind."

" 'Cupid was a knavish lad,' " Pete quoted, " 'thus to drive poor females mad.' "

"Cupid had nothing to do with it," said Timuroff. "If anything, it was Pan at his most goatish, or at least his feminine counterpart. Anyhow, I hope she doesn't give anyone but Briscoe a hard time—meaning me."

"But there remains," said Timuroff, "the unanswered question: how did Minky and Lydia know Cheesy was scheduled to become a dearest defunct?"

"They didn't. He insulted Mr. Wotan. Minky was there and he saw Wotan really blow his stack. So they knew there was a real chance of a thunderbolt being hurled—remember, they actually *believed* he had a divine superweapon—and they thought it a good idea to invest a few bucks on behalf of Cheesy's soul. Neither of them suspected there was anything behind it except Cheesy maybe taking offense at some crack of Wotan's."

Timuroff rose. "Well, I'm just thankful neither of the Hanumans has my home phone. I have to take off early if I want to get to Monterey, have a look at that collection of U.S. martial pistols, and be back in time to help Olivia close up shop."

He turned down their offer of one more Courvoisier and drove home to his Golden Gateway highrise, hoping he wouldn't find Lydia Hanuman haunting his doorstep. To his immense relief, she wasn't . . .

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Next morning, he rose with the birds, ate the enormous breakfast Liselotte's maid, Emilia, prepared for him, and took off for Monterey, determined not to think of Mr. Wotan's church. On the road down, and later in the day with the collection safely in the trunk of his Acura, he either drifted along in silence or played his classical cassettes. He didn't reach San Francisco until after four o'clock. Then he finally turned the radio on—just in time to hear the announcer say, "We'll bring you the latest details about the murder of the cult leader by his girl friend after these messages."

What the devil? he thought, and forced himself to sit through commercials for an anti-perspirant, dogfoods, and the world's best Korean motor car. When the news came back on, he learned that Mr. Wotan had indeed been stabbed to death by the wife of a noted San Francisco attorney. It was alleged that she had been his on-again, off-again mistress and was the sister of the out-of-state Mafioso Mr. Wotan had chopped up in what the police said was self-defense. The announcer promised a later-in-the-day interview with Briscoe Hanuman, who, though grief-stricken, had consented to address the radio audience in his wife's behalf.

Timuroff's first reaction was one of astonishment. This was followed momentarily by shock and, rather to his own surprise, pity—which very shortly gave way to profound relief. Liselotte, after all their years together, trusted him as totally as he did her. Nonetheless, the very thought of what she might have to say, even jokingly, about Lydia Hanuman and his taste in women when her back was turned, gave him the shivers.

At the shop, Olivia was full of the latest news as received from Pete. Apparently, Mrs. Hanuman had appeared at Valhalla and pleaded with Mr. Thoth and other functionaries to let her kneel before the All-Father and beg forgiveness for her wretched brother's intended evil deed, and Mr. Wotan had finally placed a huge hand on her head, forgiven her for having such a brother, and then whispered an after-dinner invitation to his bed—to which, it appeared, she was no stranger. Sometime after nine o'clock, she had kept the assignation, bringing not only her perfumed self but also an antique dagger she had thoughtfully poisoned, which she had thrust into Wotan while he was taking off his breeks. Then, while the All-Father lay there in his last agonies, the police had been called, and Pete hurriedly summoned.

"Oh, and just by the way," Olivia added, "Pete said he'd come by with your axe—the P.D. won't need it any longer. Myself, I don't

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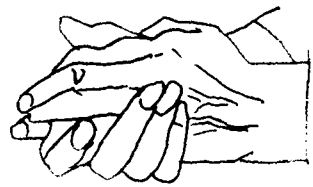
feel a bit sorry for your Mr. Wotan. Playing pagan gods and goddesses is one thing, but calling himself Jehovah is blasphemy."

For the next half hour, Timuroff busied himself bringing in his acquisitions and, with Olivia's help, listing them and putting them in appropriate cases. He was just finishing when Pete showed up. He handed Timuroff the axe. "See?" he said. "No harm done."

Tim examined it carefully and smiled. "I thought you'd take good care of it," he said, "but that wasn't my main worry. The prospect of having to contend with Lydia Hanuman, brimming with carnal passion and a lust for revenge, gave me nightmares."

Pete raised his glass to Timuroff. "To our heroic leader," he proposed. "He got the ball rolling, endured the Hanumans, and almost became the Mexican god of war. And all for what? Another hunk of iron to put with all the rest. Briscoe's at least getting thousands of dollars' worth of publicity for his law scam, but, Tim, seriously, what did you get?"

"What did I get? Well, let me explain this once more. The Vikings really had a very high culture, and they produced some splendid craftsmanship in metal. Their weapons, at least in decent condition, are very, very rare—and this specimen is the finest I've ever seen or even read about, in or out of a museum. What's it worth? I can't say exactly, because almost none ever come up at auction, but I'd hazard a guess at well up in the five figures." He smiled. "I find that even more pleasant than the chance to play Huitzilopochtli."



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THE JURY BOX
by Jon L. Breen

Ed McBain (Evan Hunter) has become so closely identified with the police procedural, he has sometimes been credited with inventing it. Actually, the 87th Precinct novels had at least four important precursors: 1. Chester Gould's Dick Tracy comic strip, beginning in the Thirties, which Ellery Queen himself once championed as the forerunner of the modern procedural; 2. Lawrence Treat's police novels of the Forties, of which *V As in Victim* (1945) is most frequently cited; 3. Jack Webb's *Dragnet* radio and TV show; and 4. Hillary Waugh's procedurals, beginning with the 1952 classic *Last Seen Wearing*—an extraordinary novel recently reprinted in a new edition by Carroll & Graf ($3.95) and continuing with the series about small-town Fred Fellows and big-city Frank Sessions.

The men and women of the 87th Precinct, who made their debut in a 1956 paperback original called *Cop Hater,* are still going strong into the 1990s with their case total in the forties. In a field that has seen many long careers (e.g., Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, and Ellery Queen, to name three who topped the forty-year mark from first case to last), thirty-five years is by no means a record, but I'd be hard pressed to name many other current series that date back to 1956. One hallmark of the 87th series has been its variety, allowing scope for locked rooms *(Killer's Wedge,* 1958), political satire *(Hail to the Chief,* 1973), the criminal mastermind *(Let's Hear It for the Deaf Man,* 1972, and other books), the occult *(Ghosts,* 1980), and nearly every other element that can be introduced into the police-procedural format—and what element can't? In the latest novel, the theme is religion, both Christian and Satanic.

**** Ed McBain: *Vespers,* Morrow, $18.95. Steve Carella investigates the murder of a priest and confronts memories of his own Catholic boyhood, while Marilyn Hollis, Hal Willis's lover, finds her checkered past pursuing her. McBain commands his elements with such apparent effortlessness, it's easy to take him for granted. He routinely achieves effects with his prose, dialogue, and observation of character most writers couldn't manage on their best day. This may not be the finest 87th Precinct novel, but it certainly belongs in the top half dozen.

**** Collin Wilcox: *A Death Before Dying,* Holt, $17.95. If McBain's 87th is alone at the top of the police-procedural heap, the series about San Francisco homicide lieutenant Frank Hastings is one of the few within shouting distance. In this one, Frank meets old schoolmate Meredith Powell, traumatized by an abusive father in childhood and now in thrall to a

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shadowy sadist, one of the most terrifying villains in recent fiction. Hastings and colleagues Friedman and Canelli may never have been in better form.

**** Robert Barnard: *Death of a Salesperson and Other Untimely Exits*, Scribners, $16.95. *EQMM* readers don't need to be told that Barnard is every bit as good at short stories as at novels. This first collection gathers sixteen varied tales. "Daylight Robbery" is an especially pleasurable double-barreled satire on the art market and the stately-home dodge, while "The Oxford Way of Death" presents a droll but grim picture of petrified academia. "A Process of Rehabilitation" and "Happy Release" ring fresh changes on two of the suspense situations most honored by overuse. The stories are so uniform in quality, every reader will probably choose a different combination of favorites.

*** E. X. Giroux: *A Death for a Double*, St. Martin's, $15.95. Barrister Robert Forsythe, whose sidekick Abigail Sanderson is mostly offstage this time, looks into threats to an Italian businessman in a strong example of the durable English country-house mystery. Experienced readers will be sure they have anticipated one of the oldest tricks in the Mystery Writers Manual of Misdirection, but Giroux (pseudonym of Canadian novelist Doris Shannon), as usual, has an extra twist in reserve.

*** Katherine V. Forrest: *The Beverly Malibu*, Naiad Press, P.O. Box 10543, Tallahassee, Florida 32302; $16.95. L.A. policewoman Kate Delafield has been the most acclaimed of the lesbian detectives, and this enthralling account of murder in a rent-controlled apartment building shows why. The victim is former Hollywood director Owen Sinclair, an informer during the Hollywood witchhunt of the Fifties who has given several of his fellow tenants reason to want him dead.

Forrest has a talent for characterization, and she manages to incorporate both explicit (but not gratuitous) sex and some consciousness-raising political history without losing command of a well-constructed whodunit plot.

*** Edward Gorman: *Night of Shadows*, Doubleday, $14.95. This appears as part of the publisher's Double D Western line, but even with the situation of a fabled gunfighter coming to town, it's really more of an inverted detective story, involving a Norman Bates-ish serial killer crossing paths with pioneering policewoman Anna Tolan in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, of the 1890s. Anna and her detective boy friend David Peary, proud wearer of a Ferguson Universal Reflecting Lamp on his hat, are likeable characters worthy of a return visit.

** Joseph Hansen: *The Boy Who Was Buried This Morning*, Viking, $16.95. The ostensibly accidental death of a young man playing the "action pursuit game" of paintball in a macho amusement park known as the Combat Zone brings aging gay insurance investigator Dave Brandstetter temporarily out of retirement. Any book by Hansen is well worth reading, but this one is

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a cut or two below the generally reliable series' average.

** Hugh Pentecost: *Pattern for Terror*, Carroll & Graf, $15.95. Longtime fans won't want to miss this last Uncle George Crowder novel from one of popular fiction's most durable storytellers, whose mystery-writing career spanned nearly sixty-five years, including over one hundred stories in *EQMM*. It shows a practiced hand at mystery construction, with the usual attention to current concerns and recent headlines—this time a very unpleasant method of drug-smuggling. Newcomers should be informed, however, that this book is many miles from the author's best, whether about Uncle George or his most memorable characters, Pierre Chambrun and John Jericho.

Though more high quality work is being done in the mystery genre today than at any time in its history, there are still certain classics of bygone times that will astonish and delight (as well as surprise) present-day readers. One such is Michael Innes's 1938 novel about Sir John Appleby, *Lament for a Maker* (Harper Perennial, $4.95). Read this book with its rich style, its vivid characterization, its intricate *Moonstone*-inspired multiple-narrator structure, and its Golden Age puzzle spinning, and then see if you can find a 1990 book that is any better—or even as good.

Deeply committed mystery fans will want to acquire a couple of new reference books on the field. *The Armchair Detective Book of Lists* (The Armchair Detective, 129 West 56th St., NY, NY 10019-3881; $9.95), edited by Edward Strosser, makes up a terrific reading and collecting guide for anyone who wants to sample the cream of the genre, including complete listings of Edgar winners and nominees, winners of other awards, plus various poll results and "best" listings, including the favorites of many of the best-known current mystery writers. By contrast, you get one man's opinion in H. R. F. Keating's *The Bedside Companion to Crime* (Mysterious Press, $19.95), but the author is one of the wittiest and most knowledgable crime-fiction critics, as well as one of the field's finest practitioners.

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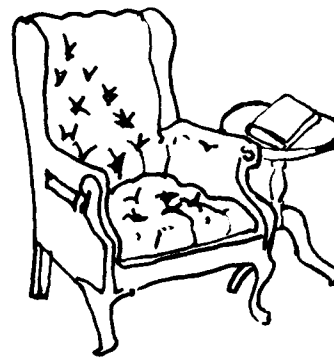
ON OUR COVER

Otto Penzler is publisher and president of The Mysterious Press, which he founded in 1976. The Mysterious Press, in association with Warner Books, publishes more than one hundred titles a year in hardcover by such bestselling and award-winning authors as Ruth Rendell, Ross Thomas, Elmore Leonard, Donald E. Westlake, and Patricia Highsmith. Penzler is also the proprietor of The Mysterious Bookshop in Manhattan, the world's largest mystery-specialty bookstore, and a partner in Mysterious Bookshop West in Los Angeles. He is also publisher of *The Armchair Detective,* the Edgar Award-winning quarterly devoted to the study of mystery and suspense fiction, now in its twenty-third year of publication. He has written and edited several essential guides to the mystery field, including *The Private Lives of Private Eyes, Spies, Crime Fighters, and Other Good Guys; Great Detectives;* and the 1977 Edgar-winning *Encyclopedia of Mystery and Detection,* which he co-authored with Chris Steinbrunner.

Penzler was born in Hamburg, Germany, on July 8, 1942, and grew up in New York City. He attended the University of Michigan, then returned to New York and worked as a sportswriter and statistician for the New York *Daily News* from 1963–69. He remains an avid fan of baseball and boxing, but is best known for his hobby of collecting first editions. Penzler is a preeminent collector of mystery fiction, possessing one of the largest collections ever assembled. He and his wife, Carolyn, have recently built a house in Connecticut, made of stone and large enough to accommodate his ever-growing library.



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A *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Here, drink this water," Ben urged.

The man tried to swallow, but the water dribbled down his chin. "I—I'm dying—"

"Who did this to you?" Ben asked him. "Indians?"

The man's grey head shook slightly. "Pirates—"

"Pirates! What do you mean?"

"They wanted the bags. Tell Sandy—"

"Who?"

"Go on. They'll be back for the wagon—"

The effort was too much for him. His body went suddenly limp in Ben's arms . . .

THE PIRATE OF DEATH VALLEY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

It was in the late 1880s that young Ben Snow first heard about the borax mines in Death Valley. By that time, still under thirty, he'd worked at a variety of jobs, from a circus in Canada to a ranch in Texas. Mining borax sounded interesting, especially when he learned it was surface mining, involving no descent into dark tunnels. Extensive deposits of the mineral had been discovered recently in Death Valley, an arid desert region of California that had acquired its name during the Gold Rush when nearly half of a party of thirty had died trying to cross it.

It was late summer, the temperature still hovering near the hundred-degree mark, when Ben arrived at Death Valley, riding his horse Oats around the edges of the desolate sand dunes. It had

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been two days since he'd encountered anyone, and when he spotted a horse and wagon up ahead it made him feel less lonely. A few words of conversation would be a treat after two days.

As he neared the wagon, he saw the horse pawing the ground impatiently, but there was no sign of the driver. The sandy soil showed no prints of other horses, and for a moment Ben thought it might be a runaway. But the horse wasn't sweating unduly in the sun and seemed to have been standing for some time. The wagon itself seemed empty except for a rumpled piece of canvas, but as Ben approached he heard a moan and saw the canvas stir. He lifted it and saw a bearded man, his shirt torn and bloody from a wound in his chest, a bloody, broken sword next to him. A basketlike guard around the hilt reminded Ben of pictures he'd seen of pirates' weapons.

He unhooked a canteen of water from his saddle horn and climbed into the back of the wagon. "Can you hear me?" he asked, crouching over the man and attempting to lift his head. He noticed a gun still in the man's holster. "Here, drink this water," Ben urged.

The man tried to swallow, but the water dribbled down his chin. "I—I'm dying—"

"Who did this to you?" Ben asked him. "Indians?"

The man's grey head shook slightly. "Pirates—"

"Pirates! What do you mean?"

"They wanted the bags. Tell Sandy—"

"Who?"

"Go on. They'll be back for the wagon—"

The effort was too much for him. His body went suddenly limp in Ben's arms.

Ben thought of burying the man there, but then he noticed the name stenciled on the canvas: DEATH VALLEY BORAX CO. It was the company Ben hoped would hire him, and he estimated he was only an hour's ride away. He covered the body with the canvas to protect it from scavengers, then he rode on, urging Oats to a faster pace.

As the low wooden buildings of the mining company came into view, a grizzled cowpoke with a rifle held casually at his side came out to meet him.

"This here's private property, Mister. Death Valley Borax Company. You got business here?"

"I came about a job. But I found one of your wagons about ten miles south of here—the driver died while I was trying to help him!"

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The guard nodded, as if he'd been half expecting the news. "Wait here. I'll go get Sandy."

Ben slid out of the saddle and stretched, thankful that the long ride was at an end. Night would come quickly, as it did in desert regions, and the temperature was falling fast. It might be a halfway pleasant eighty degrees in a few hours.

The guard returned almost at once with a short man who walked with just the hint of a limp. "I'm Sandy Wilson," he said, holding out his hand.

"Ben Snow." Ben told Sandy what he'd found, giving the location as best he could and recounting the bearded man's message about pirates.

"Delirious from the sun most likely," Sandy said. "But that sounds like Jeff Quantrell, one of our best men." He turned to the guard with the rifle. "Red, saddle up your horse and head down there. Bring Jeff back with the wagon."

The grizzled man, whose hair was more grey than red, spit a wad of tobacco juice on the ground. "Be dark by the time I get back."

"We can't leave him there all night. You'll have enough light to find him if he's on the trail. Take a couple of men along."

Ben described the location again, and Red headed off with two other riders.

"I was headed here about a job," Ben explained when he was alone with Sandy.

"Come into my office," Wilson said, leading the way. "What'd you say your name was?"

"Ben Snow."

"I've heard about you. Fast man with a gun." Sandy had a rolltop desk against the wall of the room and he turned his chair away from it to face Ben.

"Those are mostly tall stories," Ben told him. "People confuse me with Billy the Kid because we were the same age, but Billy's long dead."

"So they say." Sandy squinted at him, noting the gun that he wore low on his hip. "Anyway, if what you say is true, if Quantrell's been killed by Injuns or whatever, we're gonna need some guards. I could take you on for that."

"I was thinking more of mining work."

"We got plenty of people for that. We need guns around here."

"You talk like this Quantrell fellow isn't the first."

"We've had one or two accidents," Sandy answered vaguely.

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They were interrupted by the arrival of a sweet-faced young woman in a long dress. "Will we be eating dinner at the usual time, Sandy?" she asked.

"Better wait a bit, till Red and the boys get back. Ben Snow, this is my wife Clara, the best little woman in the whole of Death Valley."

"The *only* woman in the whole of Death Valley," she said with a laugh. Apparently it was an old joke between them.

"Ben's gonna be working for us, helping to guard the wagons."

A fleeting shadow of fear crossed her face. "Has there been another one?"

"Ben says he found Jeff Quantrell dying in his wagon from a sword wound. Red and the others have gone out to bring in the body."

"Do you think it's Kernite?" she asked.

"He told me it was pirates before he died," Ben replied, though her question hadn't been directed to him. "I guess I should know just what I'm getting into if I take this job."

Wilson seemed annoyed, but he motioned his wife away. "Let's eat around seven," he told her. "If there's any change, I'll let you know."

When they were alone again, Ben asked, "How many previous attacks have there been?"

"Two, both within the past month. Our drivers were murdered and the wagons stolen. Clara thinks it might be a rival company, the Kernite Corporation, trying to drive us out of the valley. Kernite and borax are virtually the same, except for water content and hardness. Both have dozens of uses, everything from softening water to making glass. Until we made this strike in Death Valley, most of the American supply came from Europe and South America."

"Is a single wagonload of borax worth murder?"

"If Kernite wants to drive us out, it is."

"When I came here, I didn't think I'd land in the middle of the Death Valley equivalent of a range war."

Sandy Wilson pointed to a large map of California on the wall. "Let me show you what we're up against. Here's Death Valley, right on the state's eastern border with Nevada. Kernite has been here longer than us, and they don't like us intruding. Maybe you've seen their big wagons with long mule teams pulling them across the desert."

"Not yet. I hear it's pretty hot here in the summer."

"It's hot all year. In the summer we often hit a hundred twenty-five. It's never gone below seventy in the two years we've been here."

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They were still talking about the weather when Red and the others returned. It was dark outside by then, and they heard nothing of Red's approach until he came up the steps of the office.

"What did you find?" Sandy asked him.

"Not a thing. No trace of the wagon *or* Quantrell."

"Did they take it away like the others?"

"Looks like it," Red told him. "There were some tracks, but it was already too dark to follow them."

"If you want me to, I'll ride out in the morning," Ben suggested. "I know exactly where I saw it, and I should be able to pick up a trail from there."

"Fair enough," Wilson decided. "You're on."

Ben dined with the Wilsons that night, enjoying the best meal he'd eaten in months. In the morning, after a night spent in the bunkhouse with Red and the others, he saddled up Oats and rode south alone. He'd gotten an early start, hoping to return before the heat of the day set in, but already the scorching sun reflecting off the dunes was dampening his shirt with sweat.

He stayed on the trail he'd taken when he arrived the previous day, keeping the occasional sand dunes off to the west. Before long, he discovered he wasn't the only early riser. A mule team pulling a long wagon came up fast behind him, loaded with bulging white bags. He saw the name KERNITE on its side. The driver slowed the mules as he drew abreast of Ben and asked, "You one of Wilson's men?"

"That's right. Ben Snow's the name."

"I'm Gringo Joe. I drive for Kernite." His fair skin was weathered and pock-marked, and he wore his blond hair straight and long. Ben could imagine him killing someone without a second thought. "I heard you lost another wagon yesterday."

"Bad news travels fast."

"You need a guard to ride shotgun."

"How come *you* don't have one?"

"Too short-handed," Gringo Joe replied. "We take our chances." He snapped his whip and drove the double line of mules along. "I gotta get movin'. Maybe I'll see you again, Snow."

Ben let him get far enough ahead before he began examining the trail for the track of the missing wagon. Finally, he found the spot from the day before. He recognized Oats's distinctive shoe-marks in the sand and then he found the track of wagon wheels. They led

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across the trail, and he could see they were the same as earlier—even their depth was the same, and a nick where a little piece was missing from one wheel. He smiled and urged Oats forward.

It wasn't long before the terrain began to change and the layer of sand turned to rock—and the track of the wagon vanished. Ben circled the area for an hour, hoping to find it again, before he gave up. He had just decided to head back when he spotted a man standing atop a rock formation some distance away. Ben rode toward him, intending to question him about anything he might have seen, but when he drew closer he was startled to see that the grinning man had a scarred face and two missing teeth. His hair was covered by a red bandanna and he held a sword with a basket covering around the hilt.

"Who are you?" Ben demanded, but before the man answered two others ran out toward him from hiding. Fighting to draw his gun, Ben was pulled from his horse and toppled to the ground. He tried to get up, reaching again for his gun, when something hard struck him across the back of the head.

He regained consciousness in a dim place. At first he had no idea where it could be, but slowly he began to get his bearings. He was in some sort of cave, its rough rock walls reasonably cool to the touch. When he tried to stand up, the voice of an unseen guard challenged him. "Don't move—I have you covered with a rifle."

Ben glanced around and saw the man seated with his back to the wall about twenty feet away. "What is this? Am I a prisoner?"

"They'll see to you soon enough."

The man with the scarred face and missing teeth appeared. "On your feet," he commanded. "Walk this way, and no tricks." He emphasized his words with a thrust of the sword point.

Ben could see torches burning ahead as the cave widened into a fair-sized room. The first person he saw, as his eyes became accustomed to the light, was a young, dark-haired woman wearing a wide skirt and peasant blouse joined at the waist by a fancy leather belt. His first thought was that she might be a gypsy, but then she turned and said something in French to a white-haired man seated at a rough wooden table, who laughed and showed a gold tooth that sparkled in the torchlight. Ben understood little of the language but he had heard it spoken along the Mississippi on his way back from Canada.

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It was the white-haired man who addressed Ben, and his English was flawless. "You are one of Wilson's men, correct?"

"He hired me yesterday," Ben answered. "My name's Ben Snow." His right hand automatically dropped to his holster as he spoke the words, but of course it was empty.

"I am Jean Laffite." The man rose and extended his hand. Ben guessed him to be in his early seventies, but still vigorous. "This is my daughter, Theodosia. Welcome to the pirate's lair."

"So Quantrell's dying words were the truth? He was killed by pirates?"

Laffite sat down again. "Ah, I did not say that. But, yes, we are pirates. My father was a pirate before me."

"What are pirates doing in the desert, hundreds of miles from the sea?" Ben asked.

Laffite rested his hands gently on the rough table. "Existing," he replied.

"*And stealing borax?*" Ben motioned toward some of the filled bags of Sandy Wilson's product stacked against the wall of the cave.

"We do not steal borax. That was a gift."

"From who?"

"Sandy Wilson."

"Then why did you kill those three men?"

"Did we?" the old pirate asked back.

"For God's sake, Father," the young woman blurted out, "are you going to tell him or play games with him?"

"Please, Theo, leave us alone."

She stood for an instant and then whirled around, heading for the mouth of the cave. "Headstrong woman," her father said with a sigh. "She needs a good man."

"You seem to have a good many men around here," Ben said, though he'd seen only a few.

"Toothless vagabonds? Not one of them would make a husband, and if I ever caught one with her I'd fry his hide."

"But you're a pirate and Quantrell told me he was stabbed by pirates. The bloodied sword I saw was just like the one your man behind me is carrying."

"Hazen." Laffite's old eyes twinkled. "He's a mean one. That doesn't make him a murderer, though."

"If you're not stealing borax, what are you doing here?" Ben asked.

Laffite stared hard at Ben before he answered. "If we are mur-

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derers, wouldn't we have killed you? If we are what you seem to think we are, would we be releasing you back into the world?"

"Then what are you?" Ben asked.

"Sit, and listen. I will tell you the story of my father's wanderings. He was the true pirate. I am only the aging son of a pirate. I was named after him—Jean Laffite, the terror of the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. He was born in France and came to New Orleans with his brother Pierre in 1806. He established a base at Barataria in the swampy delta area, while Pierre became a New Orleans merchant of sorts. My father was soon preying upon Spanish shipping in the Gulf of Mexico and occasionally circling the tip of Florida to attack other ships in the Atlantic. He returned with his loot to New Orleans, where Pierre disposed of it for him."

"I've heard the name Laffite," Ben admitted. "Something about the Battle of New Orleans that we learned in school."

"Every schoolchild learns about my father," Laffite said with a touch of pride. "He won the battle for the Americans."

"And your mother?"

"She was a beautiful woman taken captive by my father. She fell in love with him and they were together for the rest of their lives."

"How did you get *here,* so far from the sea?"

The old man chuckled. "The British wanted my father to help them capture New Orleans. He refused, and told the Americans of the offer. He said he would help the Americans instead, in return for a general pardon. President Madison pardoned him and his men after the victory. That was in eighteen-fourteen. Within three years, he became bored with an honest life—he gathered a thousand men and returned to piracy, establishing a base that would later become the site of Galveston, in Texas. In eighteen-twenty the U.S. Navy was sent to destroy the colony, but to avoid bloodshed they allowed my father and uncle and a number of their men to sail away. They were never heard from again, though rumor reported their death about six years later."

"When were you born?"

"In eighteen-sixteen, at the Galveston colony. During those peaceful, boring days." He laughed.

"Do you remember him?"

"Oh, yes. He didn't die until many years later. He taught me to use a sword and fire a gun. We came West, of course, striking out for the Pacific. He died on the way, like a fish out of water. I was a young man full of energy, and we plundered the border area for

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years, usually from the Mexican side. We were taken for Mexican bandits and sometimes renegade Apaches, but never for pirates."

"What about Theodosia? Who was her mother?"

"She was a Mexican woman that I loved very much. She died young. Theodosia was named for her grandmother—my mother."

"And now you're pirates again, plundering wagonloads of borax on the edge of Death Valley."

"No, that is what I try to tell you, Ben Snow. We have killed no one." He thought a moment and then added, "At least not since we have been here in the valley."

"Just hours ago your man Hazen threatened me with his sword. And I'm being held here."

"When he spotted you this morning, he let himself be seen to lure you into a trap. We know of the murders and thought you might be responsible."

Ben found that hard to believe. "And the borax?"

"I told you, it was a gift from Wilson."

"Sure it was."

Laffite pulled back. "Ask him. You are free to go now."

Hazen led Ben outside the cave, and as Ben mounted his horse he noticed Theodosia standing on a high ledge above the entrance watching his departure.

Sandy Wilson was there as Ben rode up to the familiar buildings now shimmering in the afternoon heat. "You've been gone a long time. Did you find anything?"

Ben slid from his saddle. "I found a gang of pirates living near here and had a long talk with their leader."

Wilson frowned. "You mean Jean Laffite? I met him once in town, buying supplies. What's he up to now? You mean to tell me he's the one who's been killing my men?"

"No—at least, he denies it."

"How many men has he got up there in the cave?"

"Not many. I only saw three besides himself. And his daughter."

"Theo? She's a good-looking woman."

"Yes," Ben confirmed.

"What did he tell you?"

"He told me a little about his life, how his father won the Battle of New Orleans for the Americans."

"I guess he's a legend in these parts, but nobody takes him serious.

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He's like these old miners who travel around living off their stories of the Gold Rush."

"You mean none of it's true about his father?"

"Who knows?" Wilson opened a pouch of chewing tobacco. "You should ask him about his mother if you ever see him again. He's been known to claim she was the daughter of Aaron Burr."

"What? He told me his mother was taken captive by Laffite."

"So she was. He sunk her ship and killed everyone but her—the lovely, thirty-year-old daughter of Aaron Burr on the way from her home in Charleston to see her father in New York. That part, at least, is true. Burr's daughter vanished in eighteen-thirteen during a journey from Charleston. The ship was never seen again, and some believe it was attacked by pirates." He paused. "Her name was Theodosia."

"The same as his daughter!"

"Yes. If you listen to the old guy long enough, he can be quite convincing."

"He had some borax out there. He said they were gifts from you."

"He said *what?*" Wilson asked, and when Ben repeated the words he fell silent.

"Is it true?" Ben asked finally.

"How should I know? One of my men might have given him some."

"They all work for you. Wouldn't you know if any shipments were short?"

"I guess Jeff Quantrell was friendly with them. I don't know about the others. What difference does it make, anyhow? Quantrell told you it was pirates who attacked him. That means Laffite and his people."

"One minute you tell me he's an old character who's not to be believed, the next minute you brand him a vicious killer. I know this borax has become a valuable product, but is it valuable enough that anyone would commit murder for a single wagonload?"

"I don't know," Wilson admitted. "I thought so before. Now I don't know what to think. Come on, it's almost chow time."

Ben followed him into the bunkhouse.

In the morning, Ben was up early, helping to load a wagon with bags of borax freshly dug from one of the dry river beds that entered the valley. During the first hour of work, he found himself alongside Red Donner, the man who'd met him with a rifle when he first arrived two days earlier.

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"You ever seen anything of pirates around here?" he asked the man whose hair was more grey than red.

"Never seen them myself," Donner replied, hoisting a bag onto the wagon. "You hear stories."

"What kind of stories?"

"There's an old guy we see in town sometimes. They say his father was a pirate in the Gulf of Mexico a long time back."

"What about the men who were killed? Did you see the bodies?"

"The first two, yeah."

"How did they die?"

"Rodriguez was stabbed in the chest. Fellows got it in the back."

"And Quantrell was run through by a sword. All killed at close range, possibly by someone they knew."

"Hand-to-hand fighting, with Indians or pirates, is often at close range."

"But Quantrell's pistol was still in its holster. That points to someone he knew—or at least someone who didn't seem threatening." There was something else bothering Ben, but he decided it would be better to discuss that with Sandy Wilson. He got his opportunity later in the day when Wilson rode over to the mining side to check on their progress.

"You got enough for a wagonload?" he called out to Red, who seemed to be acting as foreman of the crew.

"More than enough—we could fill two wagons."

Wilson dismounted and came over to them. "Then maybe we'll hook two wagons together and take them both in."

"Horses couldn't pull it," Donner said.

"I was in town today and bought us some mule teams. If Kernite's using them, maybe we should try it, too. Someone told me they saw Gringo Joe driving a string of twenty mules at once, hauling a train of wagons."

Donner looked uncertain. "How many mules we got?"

"Just four, but we can get others. Let's see if four of them can pull two wagons. If it works, I want you to drive it into town tomorrow, with Ben here riding along to guard you."

"Never needed a guard before," Red grumbled half heartedly.

"There are three men dead now. Things are different."

Sandy started to walk off, but Ben caught up with him. "If you have a minute, I'd like to ask you something, Mr. Wilson."

"What is it, Ben?"

"I feel a bit odd about questioning you, sir, but you did hire me

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to help get to the bottom of these deaths. You were interested in my conversation with Laffite yesterday, and especially interested in his daughter Theodosia. I have to ask what relationship you have with her."

"Relationship? What makes you think there's any relationship?"

"You called her Theo, a pet name her father uses. And you didn't tell your wife about her."

Wilson blanched. "Why do you say that?"

"Clara remarked the night I arrived here that she was the only woman in Death Valley. She'd hardly have said that if she knew about Theodosia Laffite, living in a cave only an hour's ride from here."

"You can be too clever for your own good, Snow."

"Tell me something. What's the connection between you and Laffite's pirates?"

"There's no connection. I told you, I met him in town a couple of times."

"But you know he lives in a cave up in the hills with Theo and the others. You mentioned the cave yesterday before I did."

"I suppose I've heard about it," Wilson answered. He turned from Ben, limping a bit on his bad leg, and reached up to grip the saddle horn.

Then he turned back and said, "You'd better pick up your pay tonight. I guess we won't need you after today."

Ben watched him ride away, wondering what had happened. Sandy Wilson had hired him for protection, but Ben was getting too close to something, too close to a secret Wilson didn't want revealed.

After picking up his pay from Clara Wilson and bidding her goodbye, Ben rode off the mining-company property and headed south the way he had come.

He must have had it in the back of his mind all along that he'd head for Laffite's cave, and Oats just naturally steered a course there. It was twilight and Ben had difficulty picking out the mouth of the cave from the other evening shadows, but finally he found it and discovered Theo Laffite on guard duty with her rifle.

"What do you want?" she asked, making no effort to raise the weapon.

"A night's shelter, if I may. Sandy Wilson fired me from the job."

She held Oats' reins while Ben dismounted, a gesture that let him know she was in charge here. "Why?"

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"That's what I came to ask you." Standing by the cave's entrance, even in the fading light, he saw that the rock walls showed signs of tool marks. He wondered why he hadn't noticed it before, then remembered that he'd been unconscious the first time he was brought to the cave.

"I have no idea why you were fired," she said with a shrug. "It has nothing to do with me."

"I think it has. Wilson admitted he knew you, and the relationship was more than casual."

"I know Sandy, yes."

"He's been here, hasn't he?"

"Perhaps."

"What is it you're hiding, and why?"

She turned away without answering, then said over her shoulder, "You might stay the night, but you must be gone at daybreak."

"Fair enough."

Ben saw nothing of Jean Laffite during the remainder of the night, keeping to himself in his bedroll near the cave's entrance. Hazen came by once to relieve Theodosia on guard duty, and exchanged a few words with Ben. His manner was guarded but friendly enough.

At dawn, the desert was already steaming, with the heat rising in layers from the drifting sand in the distance. There was no sign of Theo, and Ben merely said goodbye to Hazen as he left the cave. "Safe journey," the man called to him as he saddled up.

But Ben had no intention of riding any distance. He circled the rocky outcropping where the mouth of the cave was located and took up a position behind it where he could still command a good view of the trail below. He knew Red Donner would be starting out early with his wagons, but he didn't know how long he'd have to wait, even if his reasoning was correct.

After an hour, when the sun's rays began to beat directly on him, Ben was forced to seek shelter in the shadow of a boulder. He was beginning to wonder if he'd been wrong when he saw the double wagon coming along the trail, pulled by four mules. Their progress was slow and he could see Donner using his whip on the animals when the trail started to climb toward the mouth of the cave. He edged a little nearer as Hazen came out to meet the wagon.

"Any trouble?" Hazen asked the driver.

"Didn't see a thing on the trail. Wilson's waiting at the fork to follow me into town. Come on, let's get these bags off."

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Ben watched from his hiding place while a half dozen bags of borax were unloaded from the two wagons. It reminded him of the bags he'd seen in the cave that first night. Then both men disappeared inside with their burdens—and returned almost immediately, carrying the same bags or similar ones which they replaced on the wagons. As Donner prepared to board the wagon once more, Theo appeared from the cave, dressed in leather pants and a fringed shirt.

"Any messages for the boss?" Donner asked her.

"Tell him I haven't seen him in a while. It's time we talked. And tell him that man Snow stayed here last night. He might be interested."

"I'll tell him," the grey-haired man promised, whipping the mules into action.

Ben ran back to where he'd tethered Oats. So far things were going more or less as he'd expected. He rode down the hill, staying far behind the wagons, hoping to avoid detection.

The pirates' cave lay about a twenty-minute ride off the main trail between Wilson's borax mine and the town. Ben estimated that Red Donner had driven the wagons back almost that far when he spotted the single rider coming up fast to intercept him. Ben didn't hesitate. He spurred Oats forward with a burst of speed, ignoring the blistering heat that already soaked through his shirt.

Donner spotted the rider about the same time, or heard the shouted greeting. He slowed the mules and, though still not close enough to see it, Ben could imagine the look of surprise on his face as the other rider drew near.

He was barely within pistol range when Ben saw the flash of sun on the dagger's blade. It was a long shot, but there was no choice. He slowed up, drew his pistol, and fired twice, hardly taking time to aim. The assailant turned in his saddle and toppled to the ground as the horse reared in alarm.

"What in hell?" Red Donner jumped from the wagon and ran to the mortally wounded man. "It can't be!"

"It is," Ben told him, reining his horse and dismounting. "Jeff Quantrell, back from the dead—but not for very long."

Sandy Wilson had been waiting for the wagons, and he rode hard as soon as he heard the shots. Ben was just straightening up from the body when he came into view. "The boss will want to know about this," Donner said.

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"And I'll tell him about it—what he doesn't already know." Ben lifted one of the borax bags from the back of the wagon and set it on the ground. He used his pocket knife to slit open the top of the bag just as Sandy came riding up.

"What *is* this? Who's that on the ground?"

"Don't you recognize Quantrell? He killed your other men and stole your wagons. This is what he was after." Ben ran his hand through the borax and came up with fist-sized pieces of rock. "Silver ore from Jean Laffite's cave—or should I call it Jean Laffite's mine?"

"How much do you know?" Wilson asked.

"Pretty much all of it, I think. I saw the man-made markings at the entrance to the cave and that started me thinking Laffite and his men might be digging for something there. Silver or gold seemed likely in this area. You got friendly with Laffite's daughter Theo and found out about the silver. You worked a deal to buy the ore from the old pirate, but there was one problem. If Gringo Joe and the others from Kernite ever found out about it, you knew there'd be trouble. Laffite never staked a claim to his cave and Kernite could have moved right in. So you started shipping the silver ore out in bags of borax, loaded onto the wagons during brief stops at the mine."

"You got more brains than I gave you credit for," Sandy Wilson told him.

"Your drivers knew about it, of course, because they made the pickups. But then something went wrong. Two drivers were murdered and the wagons were stolen. I came along and found what appeared to be a third victim. If I'd seen through his ruse, I suppose he'd have killed me, too. He figured he'd have more freedom to operate if you thought him dead."

"How did you know?"

"I watched from a hiding place while the bags of silver ore were substituted a while ago. I figured Quantrell wouldn't let this chance go by. He attacked just as I'd expected, trying to use his knife again so there'd be no shots to attract attention."

"I mean, how did you know it was Quantrell?"

"The killings at close range, with a knife, implied the drivers knew their assailant. And they didn't feel threatened by his approach because they hadn't drawn their weapons. I examined the area around Quantrell's wagon, but it wasn't until later that the full import of the prints dawned on me. There were no other horses approaching the wagon or leading it away. You could argue that the

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knives that killed your first two men might have been thrown from a short distance away, but it's not possible to hurl a pirate sword, with its cupped handle, with any degree of accuracy. It just isn't balanced right. That left only two possibilities. Either the killer was hidden on the wagon the entire time or there was no killer and Quantrell stabbed himself."

"But you saw him dying!" Wilson protested.

"I saw a bloody sword and blood on his chest. There *was* a wound, but you can see for yourself it was little more than a scratch." Ben motioned toward the body on the ground. "Since his own body wouldn't be found as the others were, Quantrell needed a witness to report his death. If I hadn't happened along, he figured someone from Kernite would find him and report it."

"There was no chance of the killer hiding in the wagon?"

"It was empty when I found it. The borax had been removed. There was no hiding place. That was another clue. When I returned to the spot the following morning, I noticed that the wagon tracks leading away were the same depth as the earlier ones. Yet we were supposed to believe that Quantrell's killer removed the heavy load after stabbing him. If that was true, the wheel tracks leaving the scene would have been shallower. The truth was that Quantrell himself unloaded the wagon and hid the cargo, then drove it to the trail where someone would find him."

"If a Kernite wagon had happened along, they might have brought him back to our place."

"Then he'd tell his story of being wounded and robbed. But he was gambling on a lone rider who'd leave him, so he could fake his own death."

Sandy Wilson held out his hand. "You've done me a great service, Ben. Your job here's still open if you want it."

"This region's too hot for me," Ben told him. "I'm riding north, till I find some cooler air."

On his way north, Ben thought about Jean Laffite and his daughter Theodosia. Maybe they should have found a cooler climate, too.

"Q"

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a *NEW* short story by

JUNE THOMSON

He was a thickset, broad-shouldered man with an air of joviality about him which wasn't entirely convincing. He was overacting the role of "mine host," exchanging a joke here, guffawing with laughter there—part of an act to please the customers. Mary felt that as soon as the bar closed it would all be switched off along with the lights . . .

THE WHITE HART MURDERS

BY JUNE THOMSON

I had intended setting out from London on Thursday morning for Cornwall in order to avoid the notorious Friday POETS bottleneck on the roads—push-off early, tomorrow's Saturday. That way, I thought, I could take my time, stop somewhere on the journey for a leisurely lunch, and arrive at Louise and Tom's at teatime without having to join in that lemminglike rush for the southwest coast which seems to overtake most holiday-makers.

I was looking forward to a few days' break with them—a chance to laze on the beach, walk the cliffs, drink beer in their local pub. It was a hot summer that year and the London air tasted gritty and exhausted, the oxygen eaten up by car fumes and other people's irritability.

Then, almost at the last moment, on the Wednesday afternoon, my publisher phoned me. There was a problem with one or two of the photographs they'd commissioned for a book about gardens I'd recently submitted. Could I come into the office the following morning to sort it out?

I could hardly refuse—I'd be away until the middle of the following week.

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I rang Tom and Louise that evening to explain the change in my plans. I'd have to drive down on Friday, a day later than arranged.

It was Louise who answered the phone.

"Oh, Mary, darling, what a bore for you!" she exclaimed. "We've booked a table at the King's Head in Trebarton for Friday evening—our treat, of course—and it'll make it such a rush for you if the moment you arrive we whisk you off in the car. Couldn't you possibly make it Thursday, after all?"

I could see her point of view. Trebarton was a good hour's drive from Portrowe where she and Tom lived. If I were held up in traffic, I'd barely have time to shower and change after the journey from London before setting out again. It was hardly the best way to start the restful holiday I'd been looking forward to.

As I hesitated, Louise made up my mind for me.

"Look, darling," she said, "why don't you start off on Thursday afternoon as soon as the meeting's over, stop somewhere overnight, and finish the drive down here on Friday morning? Then you could arrive here for lunch with plenty of time to rest in the afternoon."

Before I could think of any objections to this plan, Louise rattled on, "And I know just the place where you could stay. It's a delightful little country pub, off the main road, so you shouldn't have any problem getting a room for the night. And the food's delicious. Tom and I had lunch there a couple of years ago when he was in the area on business. It's run by a charming couple. Now what was the name of it? Oh, Lord, how stupid of me—"

"Perhaps Tom can remember it," I suggested.

"Tom's out for the evening," Louise replied. "Give me a moment, darling, and I'll think of it. Ah, of course! It's the White Hart at Affringham. That's a tiny village in Dorset, very pretty and not far from Dorchester. And you could use the White Hart in that book you were telling me about, the one on historic pubs. It was the scene of a double murder sometime in the late seventeen-hundreds—I can't remember the exact date. But according to the story, a local farmer used to come into the village on horseback to drink at the White Hart when the landlord had gone to market, although what a publican was doing going to market I've no idea. I didn't follow that part of it.

"Anyway—" and here Louise took a deep breath "—the farmer, who was a bachelor and was known as Black Jake—gorgeous name, isn't it?—fell in love with the wife, who was quite beautiful and much younger than her husband. You can imagine what happened,

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can't you? The husband came home, found the pair of them together, and shot them both in one of the downstairs rooms—the bar, I think. I've forgotten some of the details. But have a chat with the present landlord's wife. She's the one who knows all about it. So I take it you'll book in there and we'll see you about lunchtime on Friday?"

"All right," I agreed, acquiescing. Louise is never happier than when making plans for other people.

I have to admit, though, that her suggestion was appealing. By staying overnight at the White Hart, I could not only break my journey but I could also, as Louise had pointed out, gather material for the book I was thinking of compiling on interesting English country pubs, those with something unusual about their history, such as a resident ghost, which I would illustrate with my own photographs. My agent had made encouraging noises and I'd already started a portfolio of ideas. The White Hart with its rustic double murder seemed a good candidate for inclusion.

Consequently, I looked up Affringham on the roadmap and, having found it, I rang Directory Inquiries for the telephone number of the White Hart.

A young woman answered when I phoned the public house.

Yes, she said, they had a single room free for the following night.

I booked it and rang off.

The next day, as soon as the meeting at the publisher's was over, I set off for Affringham, arriving there in the late afternoon.

The village was as pretty as Louise had described it, isolated in a fold of the Dorset downs in true Hardy countryside, its white-plastered and thatched cottages looking as if they might have formed the setting for one of his Wessex novels. I half expected to see Tess come walking down the road between the high hedges with her pail and milking-stool from the meadow where the black-and-white cows were grazing.

The White Hart was at the far end of the village, set apart from the other houses and cottages which clustered near the church. As I parked the car and got out, I had the impression that it might at one time have been a farmhouse.

It was a low, rambling building of old brick and tile, with several single-storeyed additions which might have once been stables or dairies and which extended round a courtyard garden, laid out with beds of flowers and aromatic herbs but which probably had formed the original farmyard.

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The interior of the house bore out this impression. The front door led into a large, square hall, more like the entrance to a private house than a pub, which was floored with flagstones, polished to a high gloss, which generations of farm-boots had worn away into hollows and depressions. A steep oak staircase led to the upper floor while two doors opened off the hall, the one on the right into a large lounge bar furnished with Windsor chairs and low tables. The door to the left led into a smaller bar, more like an old-fashioned taproom, with a beamed ceiling and a bare stone floor, the only furniture consisting of a window-seat and a pair of high-backed settles, the wood blackened by age, which stood on either side of an open brick fireplace.

Neither of the two bars was open yet for business, although a young, fair-haired woman was busy in the larger of them, arranging clean glasses on the shelves behind the counter. She wasn't yet aware of my presence and I was quite happy to stand in the hall in the sunlight that fell through the open front door, my suitcase at my feet, looking about me and trying to imagine the place as it might have looked two hundred years before at the time of the murders.

If I was right and the place had originally been a farmhouse, then the pub had probably started off as an alehouse, which would explain that part about the landlord going to market which Louise had found puzzling. At the time when most farmers' wives made their own beer for their families and hired hands, it was not uncommon for some of them, especially those living near a road or a village, to open up one room in their houses in order to sell off any surplus ale to travelers passing through the area, or to those local people who had neither the time nor the inclination for home-brewing. Many country pubs had started trading in this way. As far as the farmers' wives were concerned, it provided a nice little regular income, especially in times of bad harvests or low prices.

Given that background, I could understand how Black Jake, a bachelor as Louise had described him, with possibly no woman at home to do his brewing for him, could have ridden over from his outlying farm to enjoy not only the beer but also the charms of the young alewife when her husband was away at market.

I was wondering which bar the murders had taken place in—probably the smaller of the two, I decided: it looked a suitable setting—when the young woman glanced across and, seeing me standing in the hall, smiled and came forward to meet me; possibly

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the landlord's wife whom Louise had advised me to ask about the story of the double murder.

"I'm sorry to keep you waiting," she said, speaking with the gentle Dorset accent. "You're Miss Howard, aren't you, who phoned yesterday for a booking? Your room's ready. If you'll come upstairs."

She was pretty enough to have been Tess or any of Hardy's country beauties—soft, rounded flesh, blue eyes, a quantity of fair hair which clustered about her head in small tendrils, and with a ripe wholesomeness about her that reminded me of apples and corn and buttermilk.

Taking my suitcase, she preceded me up the stairs and along a passage to a bedroom which overlooked the courtyard.

That, too, was pretty and wholesome, with simple country furniture, flower-sprigged fabric, and a sweet scent coming in through the open window from the herb garden below.

I was pleased, though, to see that the bed was a modern, interior-sprung divan and that a small bathroom led off to the right, equipped with a shower, basin, and low-level suite.

"I hope you'll be comfortable," the young woman was saying. "If there's anything you need, just ask. I'll be downstairs in the bar."

"There is one thing," I said. "Would it be all right if I took some photographs of the pub?"

"I don't think Mr. Jefford would mind," she replied. "People often do. It's very attractive, isn't it?"

And with another smile, she told me that dinner would be at half past seven and left the room before I could check with her that she wasn't, after all, as I had first thought, the landlord's wife. Her reference to "Mr. Jefford," presumably the landlord, suggested that he was her employer, not her husband. It also struck me as slightly odd that neither he nor his wife had been there to meet me.

It was a small point and I soon dismissed it. With a pub to run and dinner to cook, they were probably busy elsewhere. I unpacked what I would need for the night, had a shower, and changed before, taking my camera with me, I went downstairs.

There was no one at all about this time and the doors to both bars were now closed, although somewhere from the rear of the building I could hear voices, a man's and a woman's, raised in what sounded like an urgent discussion—too far away, though, for me to distinguish individual words.

Letting myself out by the front door, I stopped to take several photographs of the exterior of the pub from different angles and

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then set off down the road toward the village, where I wandered about for over an hour, using up the film with more shots of the cottages and their gardens as well as the church and its graveyard.

It was a pretty country church with a flint tower, the grass between the graves neatly mown and with old-fashioned damask roses planted along the paths, their perfume almost overwhelmingly heavy in the warm evening air. It was peaceful after London and the drive down there through the traffic. I could hear nothing except a blackbird singing its heart out from the roof of the porch and the faraway drone of a tractor or a combine-harvester working a distant field.

Many of the gravestones were old, dating back to the Eighteenth Century, and I stopped in front of some of them to read the inscriptions, wondering which were those of Black Jake and his mistress, the beautiful young wife of the landlord of the White Hart, both of whom would surely have been buried in the local churchyard. But, not knowing their full names, there was no way of telling which were theirs. I was struck, though, by the continuity of the generations. The same surnames occurred again and again—the Coombes, the Tranters, the Ashwoods.

It was nearly seven o'clock when I returned to the White Hart. Both bars were now open and both were busy, especially the larger of the two. I looked briefly inside them on my way upstairs to leave my camera in my room. A young man was in sole charge of the taproom. Shirt sleeves rolled up, he was occupied with pulling pints for what appeared to be mostly local people from the village. The larger lounge bar was evidently popular with a more affluent crowd drawn from a wider area, judging by their clothes and accents and the number of BMWs and Mercedes I had seen parked on the graveled area to the side of the pub.

The pretty, fair-haired young woman was behind the counter in this bar, together with an older man, in his forties—Mr. Jefford, the landlord of the pub, I assumed.

I had the opportunity to study him when, a little later, I came downstairs from my room and went into the bar to order a sherry.

He was a thick-set, broad-shouldered man with an air of joviality about him which wasn't entirely convincing. He was overacting the role of "mine host," exchanging a joke here, guffawing with laughter there—part of an act to please the customers. I felt that as soon as the bar closed it would all be switched off along with the lights.

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Louise had spoken of the landlord and his wife as being "charming," an epithet I would not myself have applied to him.

And there was still no sign of his wife.

I saw her a little later in the dining room.

It was at the rear of the house, in one of the single-storeyed additions which had probably formed part of the outbuildings, and was reached by a passage leading off the main hall. Some of its original atmosphere had been preserved in its whitewashed walls and raftered ceiling.

The place was as popular as the lounge bar. By the time I had finished my sherry, many of the tables were already occupied by the same BMW set I had seen earlier. I chose one of the few empty ones and looked around for Mrs. Jefford.

There were three waitresses on duty—pleasant, middle-aged local women, one of whom brought me a menu. It was while I was reading it that I caught sight of the elusive landlord's wife.

She was on the far side of the room at a long oak table on which the cheeses were served, cutting a portion of a perfect-looking Stilton for one of the other diners.

She was half turned away from me and my first impression was of an attractive, dark-haired woman in her early thirties, with a good figure set off by a black, well fitting dress and one of those profiles which have the clear-cut outline of a head on a coin. Then she turned fully around to hand the plate to the waitress and I saw, with a small shock, that the other side of her face, the one which had been invisible until that moment, was disfigured by a large puckered scar which spread down from the temple to cover half of the cheek.

It crossed my mind at that moment to wonder why Louise hadn't mentioned this fact to me when I had spoken to her on the phone. It was the type of personal detail that she would normally have commented on with a remark such as: "And by the way, darling, don't take any notice of the scar on her face."

Perhaps Louise had forgotten? It seemed unlikely. Or perhaps the White Hart had changed hands since she and Tom had lunched there? After all, it was two years since they had last visited the place and landlords and their wives aren't necessarily fixtures.

Absurdly, though, and without quite being able to rationalize my reaction, I felt too inhibited by the sight of the scar to want to approach the woman with my queries about the murders. But in

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some inexplicable way, it would seem like an intrusion. I could understand why she kept in the background and why I hadn't seen her serving in either of the bars. That role would be too public.

There was an air of quiet sadness about her which added to this impression of unapproachability. She seemed withdrawn, supervising in an unobtrusive manner, rarely smiling and never approaching the tables but liaising between the chef backstage in the kitchen and the waitresses.

But Louise had been right about one fact—the food was delicious. I ate steadily and with considerable pleasure through homemade paté, roast pheasant with new potatoes and garden peas which tasted as if they had been picked that afternoon and not taken from a deep-freeze, fresh raspberries with clotted farmhouse cream, and a slice of the Stilton that was as good as it looked, served with an excellent Chateauneuf du Pape.

As I ate, I pondered the question of whom I should approach about the White Hart murders.

Not Mrs. Jefford, as I had decided. Nor Mr. Jefford, either. I hadn't taken to him at all. There remained the fair-haired barmaid or the young man in the taproom, and I made up my mind to speak to the latter. The lounge bar was too crowded for any lengthy conversation. The smaller one looked more intimate.

In the event, I made the wrong choice.

After dinner, I moved into the taproom, where I ordered a brandy, sizing up the young barman as he poured it. He seemed pleasant and friendly and, as he placed the glass in front of me together with my change, I opened the conversation as casually as I could.

"It's a very nice pub," I remarked. "Quite old, isn't it?"

"Yes, I think so," he replied, "although I can't tell you much about it. I'm only a temp, you see. Mr. Jefford takes on extra staff in the summer when the tourist trade gets busy."

And that was that. Under the circumstances, it seemed unlikely that he'd know anything about the pub's history—and, anyway, at that moment he was called away to the far end of the bar to serve another customer. There seemed no opportunity either to pursue the matter with the young woman serving in the main bar, which remained busy until closing time, and soon after the last orders were called I went to bed, having had no further contact with the Jeffords apart from a snatch of conversation I overheard on my way upstairs.

Jefford was in the hall below, seeing the barmaid off the premises, and I heard him say, "Do you want me to walk you home tonight,

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Nancy?" and her reply, "Ta all the same, but my dad's picking me up in the car."

There was an exchange of mutual goodnights, then a rattle as the front door was locked and bolted, followed soon afterward by the sound of a car drawing away—Nancy's dad, I assumed, driving her back to the village.

The pub soon settled down after this and, as I undressed and got into bed, I was conscious of a great silence that seemed to come flooding in through the open window, blown in by the night breeze which brought with it the scent of cornfields and the herbs in the garden. The curtains seemed to breathe in and out with it and I timed my own breathing to their rhythm until I fell asleep.

I wasn't sure what woke me up about three hours later—a footstep, perhaps, or the sound of a door being closed. But I was suddenly awake, conscious of some movement outside.

The head of the bed was placed near the window and, by sitting up and craning sideways, I had an oblique view of the courtyard garden below my room.

There was no moon and the starlight was too faint for me to make out the details of the figure walking to and fro between the beds of herbs and flowers, although as it passed in and out of the shadows I was quite certain it was a woman. It had, therefore, to be Mrs. Jefford. As far as I knew, I was the only guest that night and there were no other women staying in the place.

She was wearing a long dark robe, a dressing-gown perhaps, which gave the impression of a shadowy, cloaked outline, curiously archetypal and a little disquieting, like the ghost of a nun pacing silently about a cloister. The head was bowed and the hands appeared to be hidden, while the face—or the little I could see of it—was nothing more than a pale oval against the shadows cast by the surrounding trees and buildings.

It was while she was passing through the deepest of these shadows that suddenly she seemed to disappear. One moment she was there; the next she had gone.

Then the sound of a door closing softly somewhere below me explained the apparent mystery. She had simply reentered the house—and either remained downstairs or returned to the upper floor by another staircase, for although I listened for several minutes I heard nothing more.

The strange incident aroused my curiosity and the next morning

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when I went downstairs to the dining room for breakfast, I deliberately looked out for Mrs. Jefford, wondering why she had chosen to walk about the garden at two o'clock in the morning.

But she wasn't there. Only the waitresses were on duty, one of whom served me with a substantial three-course English breakfast.

Nor was Mrs. Jefford anywhere to be seen when, about half an hour later, having packed, I came downstairs again to pay the bill before leaving.

Jefford was in the main bar, leaning on the counter and looking over some bills. Whether these had put him in a bad humor it was impossible to tell, but he seemed sullen and withdrawn—although he cheered up as I wrote out the check and, recovering some of his mine-host affability, asked if I'd enjoyed my stay.

"Very much, thank you," I replied.

I was in two minds whether or not to mention the murders. It would have been easy enough to add, "Oh, by the way, before I go, may I ask you about Black Jake and the pretty landlord's wife?" But for some reason I wasn't in the mood, and neither, it seemed, was he inclined to chat. As I put my checkbook away, he had already transferred his attention back to the bills.

I arrived at Tom and Louise's just before lunch. As I drew off the road in front of their house, they both came out to meet me, Tom to guide me into the narrow entrance, Louise to chat to me through the open driver's window.

I had only half my mind on what she was saying. Instead, I was concentrating on making sure I didn't scrape the car on the gateposts while trying to follow Tom's urgent semaphored signals—to the left a bit, now over to your right and straighten up. It was a delicate maneuver that took all my attention. It was only after I switched off the engine that her words made any sense.

"*Wrong pub?*" I repeated disbelievingly as I got out.

"For heaven's sake, let her get inside the house first," Tom protested.

The explanation came a little later in their drawing room over pre-lunch sherry.

"Wrong pub?" I said again. "What on earth do you mean?"

Louise looked contrite.

"It should have been the Bull in Comleigh, not the White Hart in Affringham," she explained. "I got the two muddled up. They're both in Dorset, you see, and we've had lunch in both of them at

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different times. It's all Tom's fault—if he'd been here when you rang I could've checked with him." She gave him an accusative sideways glance at which he smiled indulgently.

"I hope the White Hart wasn't too awful," he said. "As far as I can remember, we had a very good lunch there."

"It was fine," I replied. "Comfortable. Good food. Pretty village. What more could one want?"

"But no double murder," Louise reminded me.

"Never mind," I said, shrugging, "although it's just as well I didn't get the chance to ask anyone about it. I should have looked a bit of a fool if I had. Odd, though, all the same."

"What is?" Louise asked.

"It seemed the perfect setting for the murders you described," I replied. "There was something about the atmosphere—" I left it there, simply adding, "I might call in at the Bull on my way back to London and get the story from the right landlord's wife."

As it happened, I had to postpone the visit to another occasion. My agent, with whom I'd left my phone number in Cornwall, rang up to tell me that a commission I'd been hoping for had at last been agreed to and would I return to London straight away to discuss the final terms with the client?

But that wasn't quite the end of the story as far as the White Hart in Affringham is concerned.

About four months after I arrived back in London, I received a large envelope from Louise, who rarely wrote letters and usually kept in touch with friends by telephone. It contained a folded cutting from a Dorset newspaper, which, according to the scrawled note Louise had attached to it, Tom sometimes bought when he was in the area on business.

Had I already heard about the story? she went on. And wasn't it an extraordinary coincidence?

If the case had been reported in the national newspapers, I hadn't, in fact, read about it. There were days when I was too busy to look at them or listen to the news on the radio or television.

The cutting was headlined VERDICT ON DOUBLE TRAGEDY and the account below went on to report on the trial at Winchester Crown Court of Margaret Jefford, who had pleaded guilty to the murder of her husband, George Jefford, and Nancy Ashwood, barmaid of the White Hart public house at Affringham. The double killing had taken place in July, only two weeks after my visit there.

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According to the report, Jefford and Nancy Ashwood had been having an affair—one of many on his part, as Mrs. Jefford's defense counsel had pointed out in mitigation at her trial. Ten years earlier, during a quarrel over one of his mistresses, Jefford had thrown a saucepan of boiling water at his wife, scarring her for life. She had forgiven him on that occasion and had brought no charges against him. But his latest affair with Nancy Ashwood had been the straw that had finally broken her and, finding them together, she had killed them both with Jefford's shotgun.

The judge was sympathetic in his summing-up but, in view of the seriousness of the charge, had sentenced Mrs. Jefford to life imprisonment.

There were two photographs accompanying the report, one of the interior of the taproom where the murders had taken place, the other of Mrs. Jefford being escorted into the Crown Court building, the side of her face with that livid scar turned toward the camera.

At the bottom of her note, Louise had added: "So you got the double murder for your book, after all."

The book was eventually published, but the White Hart account was omitted.

Remembering that night I had seen Mrs. Jefford silently pacing about the courtyard garden, I couldn't bring myself to include either it or the photographs I had taken.

Nor could I forget the smiling, fair-haired barmaid, Nancy Ashwood—as much Jefford's victim, I felt, as Margaret Jefford herself—who had gone to join all those other Ashwoods among the roses in the churchyard at Affringham, where I had heard the blackbird singing so sweetly on that summer evening only a few months before.

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a *NEW* Rosso Pallone story by

TERRY MULLINS

"Have they questioned you yet?" Rosso asked Sergeant Sforza.

"Yes," she said. "They started with the top brass and are working their way down. They asked me how well I know my officers, what their weaknesses are. They wanted specific evaluations. They'll get to you soon."

"What should I tell them?" he said, trying to sound natural.

The latest education in the life of Philadelphia rookie cop Rosso Pallone, a police-procedural series that is all the more effective for being terse and low-keyed . . .

INTERNAL INVESTIGATION

by TERRY MULLINS

Rosso Pallone recognized the young man as Jorge Gris, convicted of selling narcotics and sentenced to five years in prison. That was six months ago. And here was Gris, paroled from an overcrowded prison and walking through Rosso's own neighborhood, looking about with calculating eyes.

Rosso, out of uniform, sat on Cellini's steps, picked up Cellini's newspaper, and pretended to read. If Gris tried to sell him drugs, he'd have him cold.

Gris paused as he walked by Rosso, then continued on his way. Rosso wasn't surprised. Gris was probably getting the feel of the place. He wouldn't be comfortable in a respectable Italian neighborhood. Clean sidewalks, painted houses, cars with hubcaps would intimidate him—at first. He was trying to get used to it, trying to learn who might be a buyer and who would not.

Rosso waited until Gris was half a block away, then got up and followed him . . .

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After eight blocks, they were in a littered part of town sprinkled with boarded-up houses. Gris saw a young teenager and called to him. As they met and talked, Rosso watched from as closely as he could—from behind an abandoned bread truck. He could hear the teenager saying that he would buy if he had the money but that he didn't have any.

Gris told him to get some— "Your parents have money somewhere. Go get it!"

"No. They don't have any. The welfare check doesn't come this week yet."

"Your neighbors have money. The guy who runs the meat market has lots of money. Get it from them."

The teenager left, saying he would try. Gris leaned on a parked car and waited.

Rosso had been hoping that Gris would show the kid what he was selling—that would have given Rosso probable cause and he could have arrested him. But Gris was careful. Rosso figured he would probably have to catch him actually selling the stuff to the teenager.

Out of nowhere, a police car pulled up beside Gris and Officer Courber got out. "All right, Gris," he said, "put your hands on that car and spread your legs."

"But I ain't done nothing!"

"You do as I say and don't give me any trouble," Courber told him.

He quickly frisked Gris and came up with a plastic bag, a wallet, and a knife. He hefted the bag. "How much is in here?"

"Three hundred packets."

"Cocaine?"

"Yeh."

"How pure is it?"

"It's cut with baking soda."

"Strychnine?"

"Yeh, baking soda and strychnine."

Courber whistled and put the bag in his pocket. He opened the wallet and took out the bills. "This is your capital, isn't it? There must be a thousand dollars here."

"Fourteen hundred."

"Well, you're out of business now. Make up your mind quick. You can beat it and quit selling dope, or I can take you in and book you." He handed the empty wallet to Gris.

"Give me my money."

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"So you can go back into business? No way. Which will it be, Gris?"

Gris started off down the block. Courber got back in the car and drove off—leaving Rosso stunned.

When he went back on duty, Rosso checked to see if Courber had made any report on his meeting with Gris. He hadn't. Nor had he turned in any money or drugs.

At that point, Rosso's range of sensitivity changed. For weeks there had been talk about the FBI investigation of corruption in the police department. The Internal Affairs people had been working closely with them and the District Attorney. At first it was dismissed as more of the same. Then his family heard about it. His fellow officers griped about it. But it was one of those things—like the weather and taking target practice—that affected his work minimally. It didn't mean anything to him except as a nuisance. Now it leaped out at him. Luther Cross came out of a meeting with Internal Affairs cursing in a manner unusual for him and inappropriate for a volunteer preacher at the Brother's Tabernacle.

"They ask me if I ever took a bribe and if I ever knew any officer who took a bribe. Where do they get off asking me that? And they all talk like lawyers. They ask me if I ever accept favors from a prostitute! What sort of a question is that? They just want to get their names in the paper and they shaft us to make headlines!" He stomped out of the room.

Rosso turned to Sergeant Sforza, who was shaking her head, half sharing Cross's anger and half amused. "Have they questioned you yet?" he asked.

"Yes. They started with the top brass and are working their way down. They asked me how well I know my officers, what their weaknesses are. They wanted specific evaluations. They'll get to you soon."

"What should I tell them?" he said, trying to sound natural.

She didn't seem to find anything strange in the question. "Just don't lie to them. You don't have to volunteer any information you'd rather not, but if they ask you point-blank if you've ever seen an officer drink on duty you'll have to admit that you've seen Timmler drink beer with his hoagie during lunch. You won't be giving them anything they haven't heard from a hundred other officers."

Rosso kept listening.

"Don't pass on locker-room gossip. Don't work off any grudges.

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Say as little as possible and take every question literally. Even so, they'll get anything you really know. Don't give them any trouble and don't try to do their work for them."

It was good advice, but it didn't really help Rosso with his problem.

He began to notice groups of officers meeting with the FBI and Internal Affairs. He could almost hear one of them say, "Why didn't you report this to us at once?"

The fact was, of course, that he didn't want to admit that it was true. He kept hoping that Courber would say or do something that would show he was acting for the best.

He went off duty discouraged. Instead of going straight home, he went to see his priest.

He didn't know Father Thomas very well. Father Ambrose, who had confirmed him, had left for some sort of administrative post in the diocese two years ago. The new priest was young. He wasn't Italian and had gone to college or seminary (or both) somewhere in the Washington, D.C. area. Still, he might be able to help.

Father Thomas greeted him with a brisk man-to-man friendliness and asked how he liked police work.

"So far I've liked it a lot, but I have a problem," Rosso said.

"Is it a theological problem?"

Rosso wasn't sure.

"Does it have to do with your work?"

"Yes."

"Then I'd better tell you at the start that I don't consider myself a vocational counselor. If you have a problem of personal morality, I can advise you. If you've sinned, I can hear your confession and absolve you. But when my parishioners have vocational problems, especially government workers, I feel I shouldn't make any pronouncements. In this country there's a separation of civil and ecclesiastical governments, and I think I'm obliged to avoid crossing the line. Is your problem administrative?"

"Yes, you could say that."

"Then I'm sure there are regulations to guide you."

"Yes, there are."

The young priest smiled and settled back in his chair. Rosso knew that Father Thomas would discuss his problem if he pressed him now. With Father Ambrose, he would have done so. In fact, by now Father Ambrose would probably have settled the matter.

Rosso rose and thanked Father Thomas. They shook hands like

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two diplomats at the end of an international conference and Rosso left. He actually felt better. He couldn't say why, but he felt less discouraged, less confused. The priest was right—there *were* regulations to guide him. If all else failed, he'd use them. First he would give Courber a little more time to turn in the money and the drugs. Then he would see Courber.

Supper that night proceeded with no mention of the police department. His sisters carried on an excited conversation with little contribution from the rest of the family. The television news only mentioned that the FBI investigation of police corruption was continuing.

The next day, his discouragement returned along with some of the confusion. Courber reported nothing. He acted in his usual rough and friendly way. He made fun of the new recruits and told senior officers to retire before they forgot how to put their pants on right. He named three street-corner pushers he was going after that day and half a dozen hookers he was going to line up for the weekend. He damned the Blacks, Italians, and Jews on the force and gave a libelous genealogy of every member of the City Council. He was one of half a dozen officers who shook up the men and got them ready for inspection. Nothing was bothering him.

Later in the day, Rosso got a back-up call for an officer who was investigating a robbery in progress. He found Courber's car already at the scene. Courber, pistol drawn, was behind a parked car in front of a store. As Rosso pulled up, two young boys came out of the store, both with pistols and one with a backpack under his arm. Courber aimed and called for them to put up their hands. They tried to get back into the store, but the door had closed behind them. Neither tried to use his weapon and after a brief hesitation they surrendered.

Rosso reported in and got out of his car to help Courber. "See if everything's all right inside," Courber said.

The store owner and two clerks were in a back room, frightened but unharmed.

After the usual taking of statements and making notes for their reports, Courber put the suspects in his car, said, "Thanks, Ross, I'll see you later," and drove off.

It was the end of the day before Rosso saw him again.

Courber was alone, typing up the last of his reports. Rosso walked

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over and sat down beside his desk. Courber paused in his typing, looked up and said, "Hi, Ross, what's up?"

"Last Monday I saw you shake down Jorge Gris. I thought you should know."

"Damn." He had gone white. "Have you told Internal Affairs?"

"No, but the FBI is asking some tough questions and I'm not going to lie to them."

Courber looked at his report in the typewriter, typed another sentence, and pounded his fist on the desk. "Thanks for telling me first, at any rate. There goes my job—after eighteen years of service. I'll talk with the FBI men and offer to cooperate. That ought to keep me out of jail. Only a miracle can save the pension, though."

"See the chief first."

"Sure. The chief and the union are my only hope. How did you find out?"

"I was trailing Gris. I saw him try to sell to the teenager. I was waiting for him to give me probable cause so I could arrest him."

"Ross, you'll never get those guys off the street if you wait for probable cause."

"Along with the money, you took a sack of cocaine from Gris. What did you do with it?"

"I emptied it down the john. I swear, Ross. I took it home and flushed every single plastic bag. I know the FBI claims that some of us sell the stuff back to the dealers, but I never did."

He looked sick and his eyes were pleading for belief.

Rosso shrugged and got up. "I'm sorry," he said.

Courber got up, too. "I'd better see the chief right away," he said.

As he was leaving the administration building, Rosso passed a room where two FBI agents were addressing a dozen officers. A captain of Internal Affairs was with them. Rosso knew every officer in the room. Four of them were friends. All of them looked anxious.

Courber's cooperation would be headline news. In a day or so, reporters would swarm around like sharks in a feeding frenzy. Every cop on the force would wish television had never been invented. The days since he'd seen Courber's car drive away after the Gris shakedown had been the worst days of Rosso's life. The days ahead would be bad, too. He hoped they would be over with quickly, but he knew they wouldn't.

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A story about a man with a strange obsession by the brilliant Anthony Burgess, author of over fifty books of nonfiction and fiction, among the latter A Clockwork Orange, Little Wilson and Big God, *and the Enderby series . . .*

THE ENDLESS VOYAGER

by ANTHONY BURGESS

I knew that the man in front of me was named Paxton, for the girl who processed his ticket called him that. Mr. Paxton, an erect man with a full head of snowy hair, disclosing the trenched face of eighty or so years when he gave place to me and wheeled his two pieces of luggage away. We were both bound for New York, first class. (I travelled the world in those days as an accountant for Single Buoy Mooring.) Paxton had consigned no luggage to the belt that oozed to the baggage-handlers; I had my own heavy bag ticketed and launched on its journey. The bronze-haired agent checked my passport for an American visa, as she had checked his, and she smiled me off with an embarkation card marked Smoking. I saw Paxton precede me at the security check and then show his passport to the bored passport officials. I heard him say: "Last time, my friend," saw him receive the response of a half smile uncaring and uncomprehending, then followed him into the departure lounge. Paxton grinned clean dentures at me, said "Watch this," and then placed his passport in one of the deep rubbish bins, burying it under an accumulation of discarded duty-free bags, chocolate wrappers, and cigarette packets. I said:

"You can't."

"Can't I just. That's the end of that."

From the book The Devil's Mode *by Anthony Burgess. Copyright © 1989 by Anthony Burgess. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.*

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"You'll need it at the other end. You can't travel without a passport."

"Oh yes I can and will. I'm fed up with all that rubbish. Free as a bird, that's me."

"Nobody's all that free. They'll want to see your passport at Kennedy. They won't let you in without it. There's the question of the visa and checking in the big black book to see if you're an undesirable alien."

"Undesirable, eh? I'm desirable to myself, and that's all that matters. Good riddance to it."

"It'll get back to you. It'll be salvaged and taken to Petty France or somewhere and sent to you in a registered envelope."

"Where to? I don't have any address."

"Excuse me," I said, and went to buy a duty-free bottle of Claymore and a double carton of Rothmans. I met a good number of eccentrics on my travels, but this was the first I had encountered who had gleefully put himself in the situation of a migrant bird. But he would fly over no frontier. It was a closed world to a traveller who did not carry a little book telling him what he knew already: that he had this name, this color of eyes, this weight of years, this citizenship. He had his embarkation card, however: he was behind me in the checkout line with a small bottle of Cointreau and a carton of Dunhill cigarettes. "Broadens the mind," he said to me, "travel. Or so they say."

"First trip to America?"

"First trip anywhere. By air, that is. Seen a fair part of the world by ship, but ships don't seem to exist any more. I'm quite looking forward to it."

I got away from him and strode to the bar, where I ordered a large brandy. But he was soon with me, ordering a glass of London bitter. Those bags of his, I thought, must be a great burden. He couldn't wheel them on a trolley forever. I looked at the bags and so did he. He bent down to open one of them. "Look at this," he said.

"God almighty," I said. What he showed me was a large yellow plastic folder crammed with air tickets. He said, riffling through them:

"Going everywhere. Rio de Janeiro, Valparaiso, wherever that is, Mozambique, Sydney, Christchurch, Honolulu, Moscow."

"If there's one place where you'll need a visa, it's certainly Moscow," I said. "But, damn it, how do you propose to go *anywhere* without a passport?"

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"There's going and going," he said. "When I get to one place, then I start off right away for another. Well, in some cases not right away. There's a fair amount of waiting in some of the places. But they have what they call transit lounges. Get a wash and brush-up. Perhaps a bath. Throw a dirty shirt away and buy a new one. Ditto for socks and underpants. No trouble, really."

"In effect," I said, astonished, "you'll be travelling without arriving."

"You could put it that way." It sounded like a Hounslow accent. "I've nobody left. Wife dead, kids off and married. I got a quarter of a million for the house, a joke, a bloody scandal, whichever way you want to look at it, considering what I paid for it at the end of the war. So what do I do with the money? Go to a travel agency where they gawp and bring in everybody to look at me. Open tickets, as they call them, most of them. No rush. If I miss one plane I wait for another. Then I've got these travellers' cheques, a great convenience they are. The bit left in the bank is for Jamie, he's the eldest, the only one with any guts.

"Of course, a lot depends on how long I can keep up this caper. I may live longer than I expect, in which case I shall have to draw, won't I? But I'm pretty sure it's all going to end in the air. Stands to reason, how do the damned things keep up? One's bound to fall down one of these days, and I'll be in it with a bit of luck. So nobody's worrying." He drank some of his bitter and listened, with the attentiveness appropriate to a sudden strain of music, to a voice calling a flight. I said:

"That seems to be us."

I was thankful that we had not been allotted adjoining seats. There were not many in first class that day, and I needed an extra seat for spreading my papers. Paxton was across the aisle with nothing to do except, with the joy of a tyro air traveller, revel in the amenities of a luxury flight. He called the stewardess "my dear" and "my little darling," grew tipsy on three gins but recovered over lunch. He smacked his lips, saying: "This is the life and no error." He watched some of the film, an indiscreet one about an air crash, listened open-mouthed to a concert presided over by a voice called Carmen Dragon, and rejoiced in the hot towels. He even went to the toilet to have an unnecessary shave with his electric razor and returned smelling of all the perfumes of Araby or somewhere. Eventually one of the stewardesses came round with immigration and customs declaration forms. She said:

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"British passport, sir, naturally?"

"I don't have one any more. Chucked it away at Heathrow." She gaped; she even sat down next to him.

"I beg your pardon, sir?"

"I'm not going to New York. I'm going to—let me see now, yes, here it is" (consulting a typed itinerary headed SPEEDBIRD TRAVEL), "next stop Trinidad. That'd be in the West Indies, am I right?"

"But you have to land at New York and go through immigration and customs. Everybody does that."

"But I don't want to go to New York. I've seen New York till I'm sick of seeing it on the television. I want to go to this other place, that's right, Trinidad. And then I go to Miami and pick up a plane for, let me see, right, Rio de Janeiro."

"But you can't land at any American airport without a passport."

"What will they do? Send me back home? Well, it's just as easy to send me on to the next port of call. I don't see what all the fuss is about." She left him, baffled. I, dutifully filling in the forms, felt the minimal prick of the sense of not being a free man. Abider by the rules, submitter to the white line in the immigration queue, to the customs official who handled my indigestion tablets as if they were an illicit drug.

"Lot of bloody nonsense," Mr. Paxton said to me. Well, yes, I supposed it was. I remembered old Ernie Bevin, foreign minister under the postwar Labor government, saying that any man ought to be able to go to Victoria and book a ticket for any place in the world. It was man's world, wasn't it? We all owned the planet together. A nation was defined as an agglomeration of people equipped for making war, and everybody said that the big wars were a thing of the past. Therefore there were no nations. Perhaps a nation was an abstraction whose one solidity was customs and immigration.

At Kennedy, young black girls in uniform told Paxton that he had to do what the other folk did, so he hefted his heavy luggage to the immigration lineups, grumbling about the bloody liberty, meaning the lack of it. I let him get in front of me at the desk, hearing clearly what was proceeding though I had to toe the white line a discreet yard or so away. He was told he couldn't enter the United States without a passport and a valid visa, hadn't all that been explained to him? Yes, but he didn't want to enter the United States, he saw too much of it on the nightly box, he wanted to go straight to Jamaica. That meant, the official said, proceeding to another Kennedy terminal, which meant entering one of the boroughs of New York

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City. Ah, got you there, said Paxton, this is British Airways and it's a British Airways flight I'm getting. Then Paxton and his bags were taken away by one of the black girls in uniform. Unable to wave because of his burdens, he gave me a cheery nod.

It was my turn to be processed, and the official shook his head at the folly of mankind, meaning passportless Paxton. I said, unwisely perhaps: "We're all sick of passports and visas. It doesn't keep the criminals out, does it? There's too much red tape all round. The world belongs to its inhabitants." He did not argue but he looked at me balefully. I was implying that he was doing a useless job. He did some stamping and let me proceed to the chaos of the luggage carousel.

The next time I saw Paxton was about four months later. This was in the airport at Karachi, an ugly structure full of unhelpful brown functionaries who were doing as little work as possible because this was Ramadan and the sunset gun had not yet gone off. Paxton looked well enough but he was very hot. "Air-conditioning's bust or something, or perhaps these wogs don't have it. I'll be glad to get home to some cool and a drink with ice in it." He wiped his neck with a towel.

"Home?"

"Well, that's what I call it. All the planes are the same, aren't they? When I get into a new one I feel as if I'm just going back to an old one. After all, it's the only home I've got."

"How's it been going?"

"Well, I've had my meals irregular and sleep's gone a bit wrong. I've given my wristwatch away—an Arab kid it was in Abu Dhabi—because there's no point in thinking about what time it is. It's a different sort of time up there. Stomach's played me up a bit, but I take these." He took one now, a Stums or something. "I can't grumble, I'm seeing the world, and it's nearly all sea. Not much land about at all. I crossed the dateline going from Auckland to Hawaii and lost or gained a day, can't remember which. The stewardesses are very nice, and it's the ones farthest east that are the nicest. Felt like settling down with one of these Jap girls in a kimono. Felt like a nice little nap on land."

"That's what you need. A week in a hotel somewhere. There's a very good one in Bangkok."

"I know, I heard about that, travelled with a Yank party that were all going on there. Very loud laughers. When I want a couple

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of days ashore, so to speak, I go to Rome. In the airport there there's a little hotel, more like a hostel, very small, but it's this side of the barrier and there's no passport nonsense. I get a good kip, though I keep waking up at the nightmares, and a bath and I even wash my socks, saves keeping on buying new pairs, and then I just wander the airport, having a cup of that coffee with froth on and a bite to eat. Not much to see, really, so I've taken to buying books. Paperbacks I can throw away. Travelling light now. Only one bag, as you can see. Threw the other one away at Heathrow."

"Went back there, did you?"

"Had to, didn't I, going from Rio to Rome." He then looked with a certain gloom at the huge plane marked AIRWORK sitting on the runway. "And now it's Bombay. You, too?"

"No, I'm going farther east. You said something about nightmares."

"Yes. Not had them since I was a kid. Very startling, some of them are. My old missis, dead these seven years, played hell in one of them because I'd turned the gas on the stove off. This isn't cooked, she said, and pulls a bloody big snake out of the saucepan." He shuddered.

"The circadian rhythm has been upset," I said.

"That's the word. That's the word this doctor used I met on the plane from Paris to Washington. Nice young fellow, cancer expert. He said the body goes its own way regardless of what happens outside it. And it gets a bit riled when it's sunset and ought to be midday. And your sleep gets buggered about, he said."

"Yes," I said, and then I spoke rather weightily. "Strange that the great seeming absolutes are really all relative. Dawn, noon, night. They come at different times for different people."

"And those poor girls on the planes, the stewardesses, have a lot of trouble with their monthlies. I wonder what kind of nightmares *they* have. I must ask." And then: "Birds don't get nightmares, do they?"

"Collective nightmares," I said. "Take those ravens outside the Mount Lavinia Hotel in Colombo. They all scream together in the middle of the night."

"Nice place, is it, Colombo? In what country is it?"

"What they call Sri Lanka and used to call Ceylon. The hotel's nice, except for the ravens' nightmares."

I met Paxton again six weeks later, and it was in the departure lounge at Heathrow. Inevitably, I suppose, Paxton had become pretty

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well known on the air routes of the world, a subject of gossip where air crews drank. I found him at a little white table with an earnest young woman who was taking notes. He saw me and waved, rather shakily. "I can't remember that word," he said. "The one about circuses or arcades or something."

I sat down and introduced myself to the young lady, who said she was Gloria Tippett, a public-relations officer of British Airways. "If you'd just come to the office with me, Mr. Paxton," she said, "you'll find a little surprise waiting for you."

"I don't want any surprises," he said fiercely. "I've had enough. It's my rhythms all being upset."

"Circadian," I said. The word seemed new to the young lady. She had been christened Gloria, and this was unfortunate, for she was in no way glorious. She was an Ethel or an Edith, mousy and with a mouth full of south-of-the-Thames impure vowels. She said:

"I'll go and fetch it if you like. It's your passport. It was handed in months ago, and when your name came upon the computer it was just a matter of contacting immigration."

Paxton's response was manic. "I don't want the bloody thing," he cried. "Take it away." And he made frightful dismissive gestures as though it were already there. "I'm a free man, aren't I? Free as the bloody ravens." He remembered Colombo, then. On the great black indicator the name Istanbul clicked into place and a little red light started to flash.

"That's where I'm going," he said. "It used to be called Constantinople, there's even a song about it." He did not show any of the expected crumple of his long and eccentric travels. He wore what looked like a Hong Kong suit and his snowy hair had been well cut. But the rhythm of his walk to the departure gate was ill-coordinated, and his one bag seemed too heavy for him.

"What were you trying to get out of him?" I asked.

"Well, it's a queer story, isn't it? Comparisons, really. How we compare with the other airlines of the world. And perhaps something for the in-flight magazine. He seems a bit touched. He used to be an ironmonger," as though that explained it.

"You shouldn't say that about one of your best customers. Touched, I mean. He's spending the last years of his life doing what he wants to do. His only mistake is thinking he's a free man. Nobody's free these days. He's abandoned a structure and now the demons of chaos are getting at him. Quote me, if you like." But she didn't understand and probably thought I was touched, too. She took her little notebook

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away. Her legs, I saw, as she walked off, were, and I supposed I could use the term in the context of her name, glorious, shapely anyway, unmatching of the vowels and the mousiness. Nature was an arbitrary bestower.

In the first-class club at Zürich airport, some two months after, I found Paxton stretched and snoring among prim businessmen reading the *Züricher Zeitung*. They gave him, as they say, a wide berth. I mixed myself a gin and tonic and glanced at the front page of the *Corriere Ticinese*. No news except summits and terrorism. A flight was called, to Berne I think, and many of the prim businessmen left. Paxton, whose unconscious had probably responded to the call, woke smacking. His upper set had dropped and he reaffixed it with two thumbs. He saw me without surprise.

"You do a lot of travelling," he said. "But then you're a young man."

"I also have a wife and kids to go home to."

"Know where I'm going to now? I'm going to Teheran."

"That's a good place to keep out of. Where do you go from there?"

"I think it's to—I'll have to have a look. I think it's—" He made as to open his one suitcase but was too tired for the effort. "Some Arab place, anyway. I keep wishing it could be all over. The Yanks have been shooting down civilian planes in the Persian Gulf. I ought to stick around there. And then we keep reading about these hijackers, but no such bloody luck. If they started threatening me with their guns I'd hit out and then get shot, and that'd be the end of it. You can't live forever and shouldn't want to. I had my eighty-first birthday going to Tokyo. A birthday in the air. I told them and they gave me champagne, but they give everybody champagne, birthday or not."

"Well, you've done something to be proud of. You've done something absolutely unique."

"In Rome they have the Colosseum and in Paris there's the Eiffel Tower and I've not seen either. There's also the Taj Mahal at some place or other in India and I've heard a lot about that. But it's not for me. All that's for me is the same seat and the same thing you pull out to put your tray on when it's dinnertime, and it's dinnertime at all bloody hours. Breakfast at three in the morning. It's not natural. I suppose it's by way of being what they used to call a sin, really. Racing round the earth both ways and not letting the sun do

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its proper bloody job, which is to rise at a reasonable hour. So I don't know how it's going to end up."

"You'll stop it. There's no need to go on. You've made your point. Pick up your passport at Heathrow and go into a private hotel somewhere. Eastbourne, Bournemouth, somewhere like that. You'll have plenty to talk about."

"About the inside of a plane and the places that were just names? Do me a favor."

"Well, it was your idea."

"And not such a bloody good one. Anyway, I'm stuck with it now. It's become a way of life, as they call it. A lifestyle or something. Where would you be going now, then?"

"Düsseldorf."

"To do a job?"

"Not for a holiday, that's certain. I think I'll stroll to the gate now. We'll be seeing each other."

"Oh, we will, God help me. We'll be doing that all right."

True, very true. We met again in (why should I say of all places?) Stockholm airport. But this time he was not alone. He was with a man of about his own age, though haler, as hale as Mr. Paxton had been at the start of his pointless odyssey. Unhale Paxton hailed me at the bar. He was drinking thin Swedish beer to chase down an aquavit. "An old pal," he said. "We were in the Army together. Eighth Army. You didn't need a passport in those days to see foreign parts. I don't know your name," he said to me, "and I keep forgetting his."

"Alfie," the other said. "Alfie Meldrum. Glad to meet you," he said to me, taking my hand in a strong grip. "This one here's being a bit of a bloody fool. He's shut himself up in a flying prison. He chucked his passport away so as to make sure he stays in it. He doesn't get the idea at all that it's a key for opening things up. He thinks it's for locking in."

"I'll tell you," Paxton said. "It all happened at the end of the war when we got these ration books and identity cards and the rest of the government nonsense. They'd spelt my name wrong. They'd got me down as Pixton. I thought it was bloody funny at first, turning me into a sort of pixy. But when I changed my ration book and pointed out what they'd done, the bloody snotnosed little clerk in Wolverhampton, I was working there at the time, he said Pixton was my real name now and I'd have to change it to that by deed poll. That was to turn somebody's stupid bloody mistake into an act

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of God, so to speak. So someday, I said to myself, I'll bloody show them about their stuff and nonsense about bloody documents."

His agitation was, I thought, excessive. The disruption of his circadian rhythms had driven him into neurosis. "When they want you to fight their bloody wars they don't talk about passports then, oh no. Build a free world, that was what it was supposed to be all about, and look at the bloody free world with its red tape. I had enough of that when I was trying to earn an honest living, what with income tax and VAT and the headaches I got with form-filling. Well, it's all over now. No more forms. A free man." And, a free man, he dithered as though being punched up against the ropes.

"So," said Alfie Meldrum, "he can't come with me to Oslo, where my daughter got married to one of these Norsemen. Where are you off to now, then, Norbert?" Norbert, Norbert. That was no sort of name to carry about on an official document.

"Copenhagen. Then down to the Coat de bloody Zure, then Christ knows where. I've got it all written down here." And he pointed a tremulous finger at his one piece of baggage.

I saw that the danger point was arriving three weeks later, when Paxton and I were on the same aircraft. We were both going to Jakarta on a jumbo jet of the new ANSWER line (Air New South Wales Eastern Runs; there was an only apparent paradox in our flying northwest: the mysterious East would never be east of Australia).

The first-class cabin was full, and Paxton complained very loudly to the stocky Sydney stewardess about having to be stuck next to a Jap: fought the buggers in the last lot, I didn't but a lot did, including your dad for all I know, and there he is with his computers and transistors and honking away with his nose all bunged up and they haven't got round to inventing handkerchiefs yet for all their bloody cleverness. The Japanese merely smiled at Western folly, not understanding a word. Paxton's seat was changed, but he didn't seem to like the beefy cattleman, his new companion, either. When dinner was served he said the soup was bad, having gone off when waiting in its canister on the boiling aircraft parking lot, but the stewardess assured him that the bad taste was only the taste of a drop of sherry put in the soup to give it flavor. Then, when a film was shown, he said he'd seen the bloody thing already, and the stewardess brought in the second pilot to give him fair warning. Throw me off in midair, is that the idea? Well, get on with it, sport or cobber or whatever you like to be called, and stick it up your

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didgeridoo. I hid myself behind a copy of *The Australian,* though there seemed every likelihood of his not knowing who the hell I was.

The miserable story came to an end at West Berlin. I was ready to fly to Vienna, but was just arriving from Munich International at the moment when I was ordered to proceed to the departure gate. He was in a wheelchair and apparently strapped to it. He had two white-coated attendants and a couple of uniformed officials of Lufthansa to accompany him. He was shrieking something about always knowing it would come to this, the bleeding Nazis had got him at last and he was a free British citizen, got a passport to prove it but the bastards have taken it away. He was gently wheeled towards the exit, with no nonsense about immigration formalities. For his presumed destination no passport was required.

SPECIAL NOTICE TO READERS

1990 marks the beginning of a new development for you: the addition of two double issues to the EQMM schedule. As you know, the magazine comes to you every four weeks, or thirteen times a year. Your first double issue will be the November 1990 issue, followed by our spectacular 50th Anniversary issue in March 1991. Both will be virtually double the standard size, providing you with even more of the editorial selections you have come to expect.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

PATRICK IRELAN

"I had to smuggle some military secrets out of Czechoslovakia," said Alec, scratching his double chin. "I barely got away. You'd never've seen me again if they'd caught me." He shook his head and finished his beer with a loud gulp.

"That would've been a real shame," said Fine, staring at Alec with his dark eyes. "Where'd you get these secrets?"

"I made contact with one of our men at a park in Belgrade. He dropped the papers folded up in an empty cigarette pack. It was all written in code."

"Sounds like a tough assignment," said Lovik, "especially since Belgrade's in Yugoslavia and not Czechoslovakia . . ."

TOP SECRETS

by PATRICK IRELAN

Alec Bristol was afraid. To hide his fear from the world, he lied. To hide it from himself, he drank.

He was sitting at the bar in Marko's one night, recounting his latest adventure for Bernie Fine and Frank Lovik. Marko's stood across the street from the El in the North Side neighborhood where the three men had grown up.

"I just got back from Europe," said Alec. He took a drink from his eighth Miller Lite of the evening and wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand. "I had to do a job for the CIA." The crack of pool balls came through the smoke from the back of the room.

"Good for you, Alec," said Fine, a smile flickering at the corners of his mouth. He exchanged glances with Lovik.

"What was the assignment this time?" said Lovik, trying to maintain a serious expression.

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"It's top secret," said Alec. "Don't tell anyone." He took another drink and scanned the room with his pale-blue eyes. His big nose swept down from his tangled eyebrows and turned abruptly skyward at the tip.

"You can trust us," said Fine.

"Our national security's at stake," said Alec. He scratched his chest.

"We understand," said Fine.

"Loose lips sink ships," agreed Lovik. He swung his slim frame around on the bar stool and leaned toward Alec. Fine leaned toward him from the other side. The popcorn machine behind the bar emitted a yellow glow.

"I had to smuggle some military secrets out of Czechoslovakia," said Alec, scratching his double chin. "I barely got away. You'd never've seen me again if they'd caught me." He shook his head and finished his beer with a loud gulp.

"That would've been a real shame," said Fine, staring at Alec with his dark eyes. "Where'd you get these secrets?" Marko picked up Alec's empty glass and refilled it.

"I made contact with one of our men at a park in Belgrade. He dropped the papers folded up in an empty cigarette pack. It was all written in code."

"Sounds like a tough assignment," said Lovik, "especially since Belgrade's in Yugoslavia and not Czechoslovakia."

Alec's ruddy face grew even redder. He spent hours making up these stories, and no one ever believed him. He wanted to impress people, especially people like Fine and Lovik, who knew what he really was. It had never occurred to him to seek their approval in more conventional ways.

He swilled his beer, lifted his two hundred and sixty pounds from the stool, and marched out of the bar without a word. A blast of July heat met him at the door. Sparks scudded along the track as a train rattled by. What he needed, Alec told himself, was a really good story, one that wise asses like Fine and Lovik couldn't shoot holes in. Then they'd have to believe him.

He stopped to hitch up his khaki pants and tuck in his T-shirt, then walked down the street to his battered Oldsmobile. He started the engine with a roar and squealed away from the curb. An old man at the corner hurried to escape mayhem. No matter how frightened Alec was at other times, when he got behind the wheel of a car he felt like James Bond.

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Back in his apartment on the Northwest Side, Alec began to calm down. Surrounded by the objects of his fantasy life, he felt the equal of Bernie Fine, Frank Lovik, and anyone else. Spy novels and weapons manuals filled his bookcase. Magazines for professional mercenaries were stacked on the coffee table. Two .30-caliber rifles hung on a rack and a collection of knives and handguns filled a glass display case. On the wall above the sofa, a color photograph showed Alec dressed in a baggy camouflage outfit. He opened a can of beer and slipped a spy movie into his VCR.

The next day, Alec was back at work on the Tri-State Tollway. The lanes divided, spread out like a fan, and passed between the glass-and-steel tollbooths. Alec was working in one of the northbound auto lanes, taking tolls from an endless flow of humanity. A black man in a Chevy pulled up to the booth and handed him a five. Alec watched the man carefully as he gave him his change. He believed that all black people were out to get him. He hadn't considered the possibility that they might have no interest in him whatsoever.

A young woman with green eyes and blonde hair drove up in a Mustang and laid a ten in Alec's fat palm. To him she represented only one thing. He stared at her as she took her change, and when she didn't return his look he muttered the word "bitch" under his breath.

He scratched the bridge of his nose while a middle-aged white man stopped his new Pontiac at the booth. Because of what he assumed to be the man's superior rank, Alec imagined that he was secretly laughing at him. No matter who came by, Alec found a reason to be suspicious. The stream of traffic never stopped, and Alec hated everyone he saw.

About nine o'clock that night, after eating three TV dinners and a pint of ice cream, Alec drove to a neighborhood bar on the far North Side, a few blocks south of Evanston. Once inside, he found that both the bar and its clientele had changed since his last visit. Polished oak tables had replaced the dark wooden booths. The old bar still ran the length of one wall, but it had been refinished and the man at the cash register was someone Alec had never seen before. The pinball machines were gone, their place taken by a small, low stage from which a comedian was trying to amuse the crowd. Instead of the middle-aged workers and shopkeepers that had pre-

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viously frequented the bar, it was now full of young, well dressed men and women, the kind who worked in tall glass buildings and belonged to health clubs.

Alec took a stool at the end of the bar closest to the door. You never knew when you might have to make a quick escape. He drank a couple of beers and watched the comedian for a while, but didn't care for his sort of humor. Alec liked jokes that made fun of women, foreigners, or racial minorities. This man was relating his experiences in the Army, a subject Alec didn't think people should joke about, even though he'd never been in the Army or any other branch of the military.

The comedian finished his routine and left the patrons to entertain themselves. Alec observed the members of the crowd with envy and contempt. They looked like wise asses to him. A man and woman at a nearby table began talking and laughing. Alec watched them out of the corner of his eye. Were they laughing at him? What were they planning? You could never be too careful. Someone was always out to get you.

The dangerous couple got up to leave, and Alec turned his attention to the two young women sitting next to him at the bar. They were chatting amiably and paid no attention to him. When one of them went to the restroom, Alec saw his chance. He smoothed his brown hair in preparation. "Big crowd tonight," he said to her companion.

"Yes," said the woman, eyeing him cautiously. She wore a sleek blue dress and high heels. Red curls tumbled onto her shoulders. She took a drink from her gin and tonic and stared at the pyramid of bottles behind the bar.

"I just got back to the States." He smiled proudly.

"Uh-huh," she said without looking at him.

"I'm a soldier of fortune—a mercenary." The woman glanced at him, a trace of fear in her eyes. That got her attention, thought Alec. "I've been fighting in Haiti." He recalled seeing something about Haiti on television. "I go all over the world."

"Uh-huh," she said again, looking around for her companion.

"The men down there are good soldiers, but I couldn't understand them very well. I don't speak Spanish."

The woman stared at him. "What?"

"I said I couldn't understand them because I don't speak Spanish."

"They don't speak Spanish in Haiti," she said, the fear on her face giving way to scorn. "They speak French or Creole."

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"Same difference," said Alec, his anger rising. Why did people always quibble about details? Why didn't they just take his word? He knew what he was talking about.

He wished he could get this woman alone and use her for a punching bag. Not that he would actually try it. She might know karate. Alec had always wanted to learn karate, but he was afraid he might get hurt.

A woman farther down the bar giggled at a friend's joke. People were always laughing at him, thought Alec, but someday he'd show them. Someday they'd have to believe him.

After that night, he decided to stay out of the neighborhood bars for a while. No one was taking him seriously. He needed a new bar in a new location.

Kirby's stood at a quiet intersection on the Near North Side. It was one of those places where the decor changed every time the temperature went up. When flashing lights were in fashion, Kirby's had flashing lights. When antique bars became popular, Kirby's hauled one in from Wisconsin. The night Alec first went there, large-screen television sets were the thing. He found a place at the bar and sat down, with a tall heavy-set man on one side and a bald man on the other. He ordered a Miller Lite and watched the green-haired girl on the TV set mouth the words to a popular song.

Alec soon grew weary of the singer and turned toward the big man next to him. "Not very good, is she?" he said.

The man stared at him with bloodshot eyes. "What?" he said.

"She's not a very good singer." Alec slurped his beer, spilling some on his T-shirt.

"Who?"

"The girl on TV. She can't sing very well."

The man looked back at the screen, grunted, and took a drink of whiskey. His red tie hung loose and his thin brown hair needed combing.

"I don't like that kind of music, anyway," Alec persisted.

The man took another drink. "What kind do you like?" His speech was slurred.

"Band music. Brass bands."

The man grunted again and lit a cigarette. "I've heard all the brass bands I ever want to hear." He drew on the cigarette and exhaled through his nose. "Every tin-pot dictator in the world has to have his own brass band." He spoke with drunken candor.

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"And you've heard them?" Alec poured a big gulp of beer down his throat.

"I've heard enough."

"Doing what?"

The man finished his whiskey and waved the empty glass at the bartender. "I'm an assassin," he said, staring morosely at his own reflection in the mirror behind the bar.

"What?" said Alec, suddenly excited.

"I'm a political assassin." He looked at Alec. "I kill people in foreign countries." He turned away and took a puff on his cigarette. Alec leaned forward eagerly. "Who do you work for?"

"I never know for sure. They always use intermediaries. Sometimes I don't even know what country I'm working for." He clenched and unclenched the muscles of his prominent jaw.

Alec wondered if the man was telling the truth. He looked like someone who'd been around, but you never could tell. Alec knew it was possible to lie about such things. "So you're probably resting up for your next job?" he said, trying to sound knowledgeable.

"I'm resting up permanently. There won't be another job."

"Why not?"

"I killed a man with a shotgun last week. His face just disappeared. There was blood everywhere. I can't get it out of my mind." He sucked some more smoke into his lungs and snuffed out the half finished cigarette in the plastic ashtray on the bar.

"Who was it?" Alec was hungry for details.

"Felipe Cruz."

"Who?"

"Felipe Cruz. He was a political reformer."

"Then he got what he deserved."

"You think so? I'm not so sure. He was a schoolteacher, a man with five kids, and I killed him. You could say I murdered him." The bartender set a fresh drink in front of him and he reached for it. "That's what I've been doing all along, murdering people."

"But they had the wrong ideas."

The man looked at Alec. "I don't know what the right ideas are any more. I used to know, but now I don't." He looked away. "I'm through with it. I'm not killing any more schoolteachers." He gulped his whiskey, put some money on the bar, and lurched out the door.

Alec ordered another beer to celebrate his good fortune. He'd never heard such a wonderful story. He reviewed the particulars: the

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schoolteacher, the five children, the shotgun, the obliterated face. He loved it.

By the time he left the bar ten beers later, he'd decided to adapt the story for his own use. It didn't matter whether it was true or not, it sounded true—that was the important thing.

He rehearsed the story for a week, trying to anticipate the questions it might raise. He didn't actually know anything about Felipe Cruz, but he'd watched a lot of television and could summon a stereotype for any major ethnic group and nationality in the world. Latinos, in his view, were especially dangerous and deserved exactly what Cruz had gotten.

At last he felt confident enough to try Marko's again.

"Did you hear about Felipe Cruz?" he said as he put a dash of salt in his beer.

Bernie Fine was sitting with his girl friend Celia across the table from him. "Yeah," he said, "someone killed him." Celia sat quietly with a patient look on her face, her blonde hair falling in a natural wave down her back. In the dim light her grey eyes looked almost blue.

"Did you hear *how* he was killed?"

"The papers said he was shot."

"Do you know *who* shot him?"

"No, I don't. Why all the questions, Alec?"

"Because I'm the one who did it. With a shotgun. It blew his face away." He grinned triumphantly. "I was on special assignment for the government." Alec had heard the words "special assignment" in a movie.

"You're quite the operator, Alec," said Fine. "First a spy, then an assassin. What next?"

"I can't say," Alec said proudly.

"The only problem," said Celia, "is that my sister saw you working the same day Cruz was killed. She was driving up to Milwaukee. She said it looked like you'd put on more weight."

"The hell with your sister," said Alec. A man in the next booth snickered.

"It's probably just as well," said Fine. "The guy had five kids. That would've been hard to live with."

Alec could see he'd chosen the wrong audience again. He needed strangers, people whose sisters wouldn't contradict his stories. He

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began a tour of the Loop the next evening. The beer was more expensive than in the neighborhood bars, but it would be worth it.

One night a week later he walked into The Aztec, a survivor from the Art Deco period. The bar ran the length of the room and curved in at each end. A horizontal row of chevrons decorated the other three walls. In the back, a woman was playing Chopin on a grand piano.

Out of respect for this elegant setting, Alec had put on a bright-green shirt and a clean pair of khaki pants. He sat down at the bar between a slim young man on his left and a white-haired man on his right. The white-haired man, who was wearing a grey suit and a blue tie, nodded politely as Alec turned toward him and began piling it on. "Some people say I shouldn't have done it," said Alec, "because the guy had five kids. But I don't care about that. I don't like troublemakers."

"I see," said the man. "Have you done this sort of thing before?" He stirred his drink.

"Sure. I've worked all over the world. I go wherever they send me." He drained his glass of beer and motioned for another.

"They?"

"The people who hire me. I never know for sure who they are. They don't say."

"Sounds very exciting."

"Oh, yeah. I love it."

The young man to Alec's left got up to leave and a woman about thirty-five took his place. She wore a pale-yellow dress and lots of diamonds.

Alec's beer arrived. He ogled the woman and took a slurp. "Nice evening," he said.

"Yes," the woman said coolly. She took some money out of her handbag and ordered a martini.

"I just got back in town," Alec told her. "Been out of the country on a special assignment." The woman looked in the other direction. When the bartender returned, she paid for her drink, picked up the glass, and walked away.

Alec turned to resume his discussion with the white-haired man only to find he'd disappeared. Everyone else was absorbed in conversation. No one wanted to listen to Alec. He looked down at his big belly, draped like a gunny sack full of potatoes over the edge of the bar. Celia's sister was right. He *had* put on more weight.

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Alec suddenly felt very much out of place. He pushed his unfinished beer away, left his loose cash on the counter, walked out the door, and stopped on the sidewalk to consider his next move.

Down the street the young man who'd been sitting to Alec's left stood in the shadows. He had dark eyes, a thin nose, and a black moustache. For three weeks he'd been looking for a man he'd never seen and whose name he didn't know, a big man with brown hair and blue eyes. He'd traced him to Chicago and had almost caught up with him three times in three separate bars.

A bus drove past, filling the air with exhaust fumes. The orange streetlights burned in the sky. The young man with the dark eyes checked the short-barreled revolver in his jacket pocket and waited.

Alec finally started down the sidewalk. He'd gone only a few yards when the man emerged from the shadows and stopped in front of him.

Alec came to an abrupt halt. "What do you want?" he said.

"I want what we paid for," said the man.

"What are you talking about?"

"The other two jobs. Cruz was only the first. We paid you for three."

Alec's stomach tightened. "No, you didn't," he said. "I mean, you paid someone else. I'm not—"

"I heard you in the bar," said the man. "Finish the other two jobs before we get tired of waiting. And don't try to hide from us again. It won't work."

The man walked back down the street and disappeared into the shadows. Alec couldn't move. He could hardly breathe. After all these years, his dream had finally come true. He had just found someone who believed him.

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a Horace Rumpole story by

JOHN MORTIMER

"The question is," the doctor asked with great seriousness, "do you want to drop dead?"

It was an interesting question, and Rumpole gave it due attention. When he was doing a hopeless rape, say, under the icy stare of Judge Gerald Graves, he might. On the other hand, when he got the jury on his side he felt he could live forever. As it happened, he had just received the brief in R. v. Derwent, *one of the most fascinating cases of homicide he had encountered since the great days of the Penge Bungalow Murders. So he told the doctor quite frankly, "No. I don't think I'd like to do that."*

One of the most beguiling Rumpoles ever, from John Mortimer's recent collection, Rumpole and the Age of Miracles, *published by Penguin . . .*

RUMPOLE AND THE QUALITY OF LIFE

by JOHN MORTIMER

It's impossible to hack away for getting on for half a century in the Criminal Courts, rising to your feet, bending low to say "If Your Lordship pleases" to ignorant white-wigs, or stooping to lick the boots of the Uxbridge magistrates, without feeling a little out of sorts occasionally. The truth of the matter is that I was suffering an attack of Bullinghamitis, a condition of which the symptoms are exhaustion and bouts of nervous depression and nausea brought about by frequent appearances before Judge Bullingham down the Bailey.

"You're feeling seedy, Rumpole. You'd better go to Dr. Mac-

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Clintock for a checkup." She Who Must Be Obeyed said this not once but three or four times a day over a period of months. It was as effective as the Chinese water torture and it was to escape the merciless persistence of Hilda's advice that I was driven to an appointment with our friendly neighborhood quack. "And whatever Hector MacClintock tells you to do," were Hilda's orders, "you do it."

Dr. MacClintock was a small, lightweight, puritanical Scot who looked as though he existed on a glass of cold water and a handful of Quaker Oats a day. Once in his power, he had me stripped to the waist, braces hanging useless in the breeze, as he plied his stethoscope and asked me about my daily intake of calories. "For instance," he murmured as though receiving my confession, "tell me about breakfast."

"Taken at the Taste-Ee-Bite in Fleet Street if I'm busy. A fairly light affair."

"Good." He nodded approval

"Couple of eggs on a fried slice."

"Fried slice?" I might have admitted a taste for hard drugs with my morning tea—the good doctor was clearly shaken.

"Three or four rashers—"

"That's all, I hope?"

"Apart from the sausages. Rounds of toast. Marmalade."

The doctor put away his stethoscope nervously and said, "Let's have you up on the scales, then. And for luncheon?"

"We only get an hour. It's a bit of a snack as it so happens." I stood on the fatally revealing platform.

"A salad, perhaps?" MacClintock tried to sound hopeful as he arranged the weights.

"Who am I to take food from the mouths of starving rabbits?" I denied salad. "A quick steak-and-kidney pud in the pub opposite the Bailey. A few boiled potatoes. Serving of cabbage. I find a pint of draught Guinness keeps the strength up at lunchtime." The doctor forced himself to look at the scales, and sighed heavily. "Then I take nothing at all until dinner."

"Nothing? Well, I'm glad of that at least. Oh, do put your shirt back on." He sat at his desk and started to write voluminous notes.

"Unless you count a small crumpet at teatime." I had to be honest.

"There have been times," the doctor said mournfully, "when I have known indulgence in a small crumpet at teatime to make the difference between life and death. Dinner?"

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"Hilda usually grills a few chops with two veg, and I confess to a weakness for a touch of jam rolypoly." I was restoring the shirt.

"Drink?"

"Oh, thank you very much." Dr. MacClintock was getting out the blood-pressure apparatus.

"No. *Do* you drink? Apart from non-alcoholic beverages."

"Oh, I hardly touch them."

"Very good. Just roll up the sleeve."

"I hardly touch non-alcoholic beverages. Pommeroy's Very Ordinary claret, in my medical experience, keeps you astonishingly regular. Of course, I'm extremely modest in my consumption."

"Modest?" The doctor was pumping. "Good."

"Chateau Thames Embankment. About all I can afford nowadays."

"And how much? Shall we say a bottle?"

"Oh, a couple. Maybe a little more when I'm before Judge Bullingham or Graves."

"Two bottles a week?" He looked at the blood-pressure gauge and sighed again.

"A day. I haven't signed the pledge," I told him.

"Smoke a lot?"

"Do you, really?" I was glad to hear the man had some weaknesses and, getting out a packet of small cigars, I offered one to the doctor.

"Let's face the fact"—he shook his head—"there is a great deal too much of you, Mr. Rumpole."

"Oh, I don't know." I tried to sound modest. "If a fellow's a decent barrister, knows a thing or two about bloodstains, sharp cross-examiner, makes an effective final speech, how can there possibly be too much of a good thing?"

"The question is," the doctor asked with great seriousness, "do you want to drop dead?"

It was an interesting question, and I gave it due attention. When I'm doing a hopeless rape, say, under the icy stare of Judge Gerald Graves, I might. On the other hand, when I've got the jury on my side I feel I could live forever. As it happened, I had just received the brief in *R. v. Derwent,* one of the most fascinating cases of homicide I have encountered since the great days of the Penge Bungalow Murders. So I told the doctor quite frankly, "No. I don't think I'd like to do that."

"Then you must go on a diet I'm giving you at once. No wine. No meat. No fish, eggs, bread, butter, milk—"

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"Ugh. Milk!" I agreed.

"Bread or pastry of any sort."

"How do I manage without food?"

"Thin-O-Vite." Dr. MacClintock produced a name I was to learn to dread. "Mix it with water and eat as much of it as you like. Make a pig of yourself. I hope to see less of you in about a month's time."

"Meanwhile, 'I eat the air, promise-crammed. You cannot feed capons so.' "

"Who said that?"

"Hamlet. A Dane who'd no doubt have been a great deal less gloomy with a square meal inside him. Good day, Doctor."

Is not being dead really enough, even if you have to keep alive on Thin-O-Vite? Battery hens aren't dead. Chained-up fattening pigs aren't dead. Even Judge Graves down the Bailey appears to be still breathing, if you watch him very closely. Life is not enough, in my opinion, per se. It's the quality of life that matters, and a fellow has to have something to live *for*. Some fine, ennobling, enriching experience. And that essential was supplied for me, in the absence of steak-and-kidney pud, by my engagement to defend in the case of *R. v. Derwent*. So, I was induced by that, and the insistence of She Who Must Be Obeyed, to follow the doctor's spartan regime. And now I must tell you something of that strange and, in many ways, pathetic case which had tempted me to go on living.

Sir Daniel Derwent, C.H., R.A., was a painter of the old school. He had a head like an elderly, bearded lion. He was given to wearing capes, wide-brimmed hats, or the occasional beret. His portraits of important men and beautiful women were always competent, often charming, but never stunning. It might be said that Sir Daniel looked too much like a great artist to be one entirely. All the same, his work was greatly admired by many people including himself. He had, in his life, two great loves—painting and beautiful women.

Perdita, Derwent's wife at the time he died, was extremely beautiful and less than half his age. She had been a student at St. Matthew's School of Art, where her husband was the Professor of Painting. He took her to live with him in his Chelsea house and subsequently married her. His household there consisted of his old mother, Barbara, always known as Bunty, Derwent, and Helen, his daughter by a previous marriage, who had run his life and continued to do so and make his new young wife extremely unwelcome.

The story begins on an evening which was described in detail in

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the evidence given at the Old Bailey. In the old-fashioned studio which was a feature of the house, Lady Derwent was seated on a model's throne, wearing a long skirt and no top. Sir Daniel was painting a three-quarter-length portrait of his wife. Bunty Derwent, a large, spreading, and cheerful woman, was knitting by the stove, and Helen Derwent was making trouble because her new stepmother had forgotten to order the fish for supper.

"I'm terribly sorry, Helen." Perdita opened her blue eyes wide, in a sort of panic. "Did I really forget?"

"Don't move," Daniel growled from behind his canvas.

"It's too bad of you!" Helen was unforgiving. "You know how Daddy looks forward to his fish pie. It's really not much to ask of anyone, just to ring up and order the fish."

"Don't make such a fuss about it, Helen." Bunty was always the peacemaker. "It's really not important. We'll have eggs."

Perdita gave a small, grateful smile, being very careful not to move. And then, so the evidence told us, Daniel's brush-bearing hand started to tremble as it approached the canvas, misfired, and made a long smear across Perdita's portrait. He threw down his brush in a fury and clasped his hand to his forehead.

"Hell and *death!*" he was heard to say.

That night, Miss Helen Derwent couldn't sleep. She got up at about four o'clock and, going downstairs to make herself a cup of tea, she saw a light under the studio door. She opened it and found her father lying, fully dressed, on the studio couch. His eyes were open but she closed them. He was quite dead.

Later that morning, the youngish, spectacled, and earnest Doctor Harman, who had been treating Sir Daniel, returned to the Chelsea house and was closeted with his late patient's wife and mother. He had been surprised by the sudden onset of death, and he had established that Nurse Gregson, who helped care for the painter, had been called and visited at teatime on the previous afternoon to give an injection.

I must here deal with the medication given to relieve the pain caused by the cancer from which Sir Daniel was suffering. He regularly took morphine in the form of syrup, but, to cope with the "breakthrough" of severe pain, he received booster injections of diamorphine, which were administered by the visiting nurse. She gave him the usual supplementary dose when she called the previous afternoon, and then she went off duty. On checking her medical bag the next morning, Nurse Gregson found that a number of additional

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ampoules, containing what would have been a fatal dose of diamorphine, had been removed. She remembered leaving the bag, for a while, unwatched in the hall of the Derwent household.

"You're sure he didn't take anything after the nurse left?" the doctor asked the young widow.

"I don't think so." Because of his illness, the Derwents had been occupying separate bedrooms, each one with a bathroom attached. As Perdita gave this answer, her stepdaughter Helen came into the room, holding, almost triumphantly, some articles which later became important exhibits in the case.

"Don't you think you ought to tell Doctor Harman about these, Perdita? I found them in your bedroom." What she had found was a number of empty ampoules which had once contained diamorphine, a hypodermic syringe, and a pamphlet which I was to get to know almost by heart, advocating euthanasia for those suffering from terminal illness.

This discovery led to investigation by the police, instigated by Doctor Harman. It was not until another breakfast-time, about three weeks later, that I was telephoned by my old friend and instructing solicitor, Mr. Bernard. He told me that Lady Derwent had been taken to Chelsea police station and charged with the murder of her husband by poison. "Haven't had a poison case through my hands, oh, since the Bride of Orpington in 1958. That was chocolates, if you recollect. And this is? An overdose of what? We'll go into that when we meet in Holloway."

"Poison, Hilda," I said as I put down the telephone. "Something to live for at last."

"If you want to live," she told me, "you'd better go straight round and see Hector MacClintock." So I did, with what results you already know.

The conference at Holloway was fixed for a week after my visit to the doctor, and before it took place an event occurred which removed most of the gilt from the gingerbread of my most recent murder case. I was leaving the Temple underground station on my way to Chambers, a little weakened by the sole intake of Thin-O-Vite, when I heard a familiar voice issue some kind of military command behind me.

"Pick 'em up, Rumpole!"

"Pick what up?"

Soapy Sam Ballard, Q.C., his umbrella shouldered and his briefcase

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swinging, marched up beside me. "Pick up your feet. One—two—one—two—" he intoned. "I have just walked the entire way from Liverpool Street station, along the river. Chin up, now. Swing the arms!"

"What's the matter with you, Ballard? The war's over."

"The war may be over, Rumpole, but the battle for fitness goes on. I mean to introduce a new scheme of health education in Chambers. You know what I've got in this briefcase?"

"Astonish me."

"I have a device in here for expanding the chest," he said proudly. "I intend to use it during the odd free moment. Keep the chest open! Keep the lungs free! It's my duty as your Head of Chambers to prolong my life as much as possible."

"Why should you want to do that?"

"Can't let you fellows down."

"We wouldn't want to put you to any trouble," I assured him.

"Anyway, I can't let you down, Rumpole, now that I'm leading you."

"You're doing *what?*" I felt a cold thrill of horror. Was my precious poisoning case to be taken out of my hands?

"Haven't you heard? Terrible business. Murder of Sir Daniel Derwent, R.A. Well known painter, so they tell me. I know nothing of these things. Oh, yes. I'm leading you."

"I hope you'll be able to keep up with me!" was all I could say, extremely ungraciously. But Ballard only quickened his pace and marched away. "One two! One two!" he called as he went.

"I shall be leading you from behind," I threatened him.

"It's you that's going to have to keep up, Rumpole," he said as the distance between us grew. "I just hope you're fit enough for it!" I'm afraid I was no longer audible as I said, "Don't bother about prolonging your life, old darling. Not on my account."

When I arrived in our clerk's room, things were much as usual. Dianne was making coffee, Henry was telephoning, Uncle Tom was trying to get his putts into the wastepaper basket, and Mizz Liz Probert, looking slightly better groomed than usual, was getting a brief from her tray. My learned friend, Claude Erskine-Brown, arrived out of breath. "Terrible traffic jam in Islington today, and you know what caused it?" He laughed mirthlessly. "A procession of gay and lesbian demonstrators, demanding more services off the rates."

"Why's that funny?" Mizz Probert pricked up her ears.

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"I say!" Erskine-Brown looked at her with sudden admiration. "Is that a new hairdo?"

"I don't see that it's at all funny. And what's my hair got to do with it?"

"It looks jolly nice, actually." Claude became somewhat inarticulate. "Much softer and—well, more feminine. Congratulations!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Claude!" Liz was losing patience with the man. "Give us a break. And why shouldn't the Islington Council provide gay and lesbian counseling? Think of what they save you on education and—"

"Radiant!" Claude continued to stare. "Quite honestly, you're looking radiant."

"Of course, I'd expect *you* to be against it. I'd expect discrimination from you, Claude."

"Discrimination?" He looked hurt.

"Oh, yes. How many gay and lesbian members have we got in these Chambers?"

"None, I hope. I mean, none, I think. No, I'm sure—"

"There you are, then! Discrimination."

"Perhaps it's just because we don't get many gay and lesbian applications." Claude was trying to be reasonable.

"Well, I'd like to see what'd happen if you got one. Just one! I can imagine your middle-class, middle-aged, male attitudes bristling."

"Middle-aged, Liz? Did you say middle-aged?" He was clearly wounded.

"Sexual discrimination comes in a packet, Claude. With middle-aged spread."

"Radiant!" He avoided the subject of the Erskine-Brown figure. "You look absolutely radiant. Come for a coffee later? I'll let you pay for yourself," he promised.

"Improve your attitudes, Claude. That's all you need." Liz removed herself and her brief in a rapid and businesslike fashion and Erskine-Brown was left staring after her. "Miss Probert's got a new hairdo, Henry," he said, entranced.

"Really, sir? I can't say I noticed. Got the ginger biscuits there, have you, Dianne?" Dianne put a number of biscuits on a plate by Henry's coffee, thus presenting the staring Rumpole with a terrible temptation. I protested to Henry about Bernard's insanity in taking in Soapy Sam to lead me, and he started on a long story about how Bernard got the case from Jones, the Derwent family solicitor, who

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didn't do crime, and Ballard had done a bit of insurance work for Jones's firm and they had been greatly impressed.

"This is poisoning, Henry," I told him. "Not fooling around with some piffling insurance."

So I left him and heard, as I made it to the door, Henry's pained cry, "You're not going to believe this, Dianne! Mr. Rumpole's just nicked two of my biscuits."

So, in due course, I rolled up at Holloway Prison to play an ill-tempered second fiddle to Ballard, Q.C., and act as his far older and wiser "Junior" in our first conference with Lady Derwent. Mr. Bernard, who was no longer in my good books, was also of the party. Ballard started off in the voice of a most hostile prosecutor and said to the beautiful young woman we were meant to be defending, "Lady Derwent. The extremely serious allegation in this case is that you deliberately administered a massive overdose of diamorphine to your husband, who had recently made a will in your favor. It is further suggested that you took the morphine ampoules from the bag of a Nurse Gregson who had called at the house that afternoon. Now the question is, did you administer that fatal overdose, Lady Derwent?"

"Be careful," I muttered a warning to my learned leader, but Ballard paid no attention and continued to attack our client.

"I'd advise you to be perfectly frank with your legal advisers, madam," he said. "Well, did you?"

"Just a minute, Ballard," I interrupted before Perdita had a chance to answer. "If I may make so bold. As your mere Junior."

"Well, what is it, Rumpole?"

"A word, if I may, over here." I got up and went to a corner of the room. Ballard followed me reluctantly. "Don't ask her that!" I whispered.

"What?"

"Don't ask her if she pumped her husband full of morphine so she could get her fingers on a bit of ready cash. Of all the tactless questions!"

"But isn't that what this case is all about?"

"Of course it's what it's all about. That's why you don't ask."

"Why not?"

"In case she says 'yes,' " I hissed.

Bernard and Lady Derwent sat at the table, no doubt curious about the *sotto voce* dialogue taking place in the corner of the room.

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"Then we'd know for certain." Ballard seemed to think that would be no bad thing.

"Exactly. And I'd be sitting in Chambers unemployed, having fantasies about steak-and-kidney pudding, and you'd be back to motor insurance. First lesson in murder, old darling. Never ask the customer if she did it. She might tell you."

"Really, Rumpole!" Ballard seemed shocked. "What do you suggest I ask her?"

"Ask her about the weather. Ask her if she's seen any good films lately. Murder conferences aren't for asking awkward questions, Ballard. Save those for the Prosecution. All we need now is to give the client a little confidence."

"Confidence, Rumpole?" It seemed a quality Ballard didn't know how to impart. "Watch carefully," I said, "and you might learn something." I led him back to the table, sat, smiled at Perdita, and began to conduct the conference in my own way, starting with an entirely harmless question. "Lady Derwent. You met your husband when he was a professor at St. Matthew's?"

"Yes. I was a student."

"And he fell in love with you? Quite understandably."

"I don't know about that." She rewarded me with a faint smile. "I fell in love with him."

"Then he got a divorce and married you. I think you were twenty-four at the time."

"Twenty-three."

"And his daughter Helen continued to live with you. She was about fifteen years older?"

"I'm afraid Helen always resented me. She thought I'd taken Daniel away from her mother. It wasn't like that at all."

"Of course not." I looked understanding. "They'd separated before you met, hadn't they?"

"They used to separate and come together. It was never happy. But when it finally ended, well, Daniel's wife was very bitter."

"Helen was bitter, too?" I could imagine the jealousy an older daughter felt toward the younger beauty who she thought had ensnared her father.

"I think she worshipped Daniel. She didn't make it particularly easy for me." Then Ballard couldn't resist what he clearly considered an awkward question for Perdita. "So did you resent your husband having his daughter to live with you? Were there quarrels about that? Were there, Lady Derwent?"

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"Daniel hated quarrels. I did my best not to have them," she said, and I believed her. In my role as the nice policeman I asked gently, "I suppose Helen wanted to go on running the house. Just as her mother had for so many years?"

"You understand!" She looked at me gratefully.

"I'd better understand Helen Derwent," I told her, "if I'm going to cross-examine her." Bernard cleared his throat in an embarrassed manner and Ballard protested, "I imagine I will be cross-examining Miss Helen Derwent, Rumpole. It will fall to *me,* as *leading* Counsel for the Defense."

"But if you happen to be feeling tired. When we get to that stage," I suggested hopefully.

"I don't anticipate feeling in the least tired, Rumpole. At any stage."

"Don't let's look on the black side."

And then, desperate to make peace between his barristers, Mr. Bernard was ill-advised enough to say, "Mr. Rumpole. Mr. Ballard is briefed as leading Counsel in this case. On our client's previous solicitor's instructions."

"Mr. Bernard!" I interrupted him with some force. "Perhaps I should remind you. There is a trial which has gone down to history as the Penge Bungalow Murders. If you happen to consult the relevant volume of Notable British Trials you will find that I brought home victory in that case alone *and without a leader.* That is my last word to you on the subject. Now, Lady Derwent." I smiled at Perdita and took over control of the conference again. "You also lived with your mother-in-law, Mrs. Barbara Derwent. How did you get on with her?"

"I've always loved Bunty," Perdita told us. "She never criticized me, or made me feel a fool about the house or anything. And she was so pleased when Daniel and I got married. She said Imogen—"

"That's the first Lady Derwent," Mr. Bernard explained to Soapy Sam, who was looking a little lost.

"Yes. Bunty said Imogen was the most terrible snob. Bunty wasn't a snob at all. She'd been a dancer when she was young. In the chorus. Of course, you'd never guess that now. She's got so fat. Funny, isn't it?"

"We all change, Lady Derwent, over the years, and we can't all get many laughs out of it. I suppose you don't have a biscuit about you, by any chance? No? Of course not." I had been stopped in my tracks by pangs of hunger and Ballard, seizing his chance, took over

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again with, "Lady Derwent. We've had the post mortem results on your husband."

"The medical evidence." I put it more attractively.

"He was clearly suffering from an illness which gave him only a short time to live."

"It doesn't make any sense," I said thoughtfully, and Perdita, with whom I had set up a certain rapport, nodded. "I've been trying to work it out. Danny loved life so much. Everything about it. He loved his work. I think he loved me."

"What doesn't make sense," I suggested, "is the idea of anyone killing Sir Daniel for his money when he was going to die anyway. No doubt that's a point that's even occurred to you, Ballard."

Ballard, however, was busy getting out of his papers a copy of a pamphlet to which he obviously attached great importance. "We also have seen," he told our client, "copies of this booklet found among the clothes in your bedroom, Lady Derwent. It's a work entitled 'Helping the Loved One Across the River.' "

"I honestly don't know how it got there. I'd never seen it before." Perdita looked at us anxiously.

"It seems to advocate euthanasia."

"Ballard!" It was my duty to warn him.

" 'The troubled soul in a state of acute pain or terminal illness—' " Soapy Sam started to read, and there was nothing else for it. I rose to my feet. "Well, now, Lady Derwent," I said. "It's been most useful for us to have this little chat with you."

But Ballard went on reading remorselessly from the work in his hand: " 'Relatives or dear friends may provide a loved one with a bridge or at least a little raft on which to float gently away to a happier land. All that is needed is a rudimentary knowledge of medical science and the effects of various drugs on the unnecessary prolongation of life. Join Across the River, 19A Goshawk Street, Kentish Town for full details.' "

"Must be getting along now." I managed a realistic stagger and grasped the back of my chair. "The truth of the matter is, I'm not feeling absolutely up to snuff."

"Rumpole! You look decidedly unfit, sir." Mr. Bernard was easily persuaded. "What is it?"

"The prolongation of life, Bernard! It usually proves fatal in the end."

"Mr. Rumpole—" Perdita was touchingly concerned. "I shall be all right, Lady Derwent," I reassured her. "You and I will probably

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be all right. Mr. Bernard, how about running us back to the Temple in your sturdy little motor?" At that moment I would have dropped dead rather than let Ballard ask the idiotic question he had in mind.

Sometime later I was having breakfast in the Taste-Ee-Bite tearoom in Fleet Street, loading my tray with nothing but a cup of black coffee, a glass of orange juice, and *The Times*, when I saw Mizz Probert in front of me in the queue. She looked at my iron rations and I explained that some dotty doctor wanted to keep me alive, although I supposed she held the view that when men get to a certain age they should be bagged up and put out with the dustbins. She didn't deny the charge, but went off to breakfast with a pleasant-looking young man who I judged to be an embryo barrister. When she had gone, I weakened and added a sugar bun to my purchase—this I secreted in my pocket for use only in an emergency. Then I went to a table near Mizz Probert and hid behind my *Times*. From this point of vantage, I was able to hear Liz making what I thought was a rather rash promise to her companion.

"I'll get you into our Chambers, I promise you, Dave. It just needs a little organization. There's a man called Claude Erskine-Brown in charge of admission. To be honest, he reckons he fancies me."

"Liz"—the young man was clearly of pure and moral disposition—"you don't mean to say you'd use sexual manipulation?"

"It's all in a good cause, Dave." She put out her hand and held his across the table. "We can work together on the rent inquiry in Tower Hamlets. You wouldn't mind going for an interview with Claude, would you?"

"For you, Liz," young Dave spoke with a certain amount of passion, "I'd go for an interview with the Lord Chancellor."

"Oh, don't worry. Claude's not a bit like the Lord Chancellor. For one thing, he can't seem to keep his mind off sex."

After this meeting, Mizz Probert went to her admirer Claude Erskine-Brown and again accused him of discrimination against gay and lesbian persons. When he hotly denied all such prejudices, she challenged him with "I bet you don't let Dave Inchcape into Chambers. He's coming to see you next week." From this, Erskine-Brown made certain deductions about young Inchcape. His subsequent interview with the new applicant took, as he told me much later, a somewhat unusual course.

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"Inchcape?" Claude asked nervously when the young man entered his room.

"Yes. Dave Inchcape."

"Dave. Of course." Claude raised a hand. "Hi! Why don't you sit down?" He pointed to a distant chair. "Over there." He sat himself safely behind his desk and seemed to have difficulty in starting the conversation. "Well—Dave. Fact is, Liz Probert's had a long talk to me about you. Great girl, Liz. She's tremendously keen that we shouldn't have any kind of—discrimination in Chambers. I mean, we shouldn't be against you simply because you are what you are."

"What am I?"

"Well. What you are. Entirely through no fault of your own." Claude was unable to make himself completely clear.

"You mean young?" Inchcape was puzzled.

"Well. Yes. Young, I suppose. And—well, these things are no doubt decided for us at a very early age."

"You mean, wanting to be a barrister?" The young man was doing his best to follow Claude's drift.

"Well, that. And—I mean, it's a matter of the sort of genes you get born with. Biologically speaking."

"You think I got born with a barrister's genes?" Inchcape asked seriously.

"Oh, very good that!" Claude laughed appreciatively. "Very funny. Of course, you lot always have a marvelous sense of humor and, we always noticed at Winchester, a great aptitude for the violin."

"I can't do it," Inchcape said after a thoughtful silence.

"What?"

"Play the violin."

"Well, you can rest assured, Dave," Claude said generously, "we're not going to hold that against you."

"Well, thanks." And after another somewhat embarrassed pause, Inchcape added, "I expect you want to know about my experience."

"Good heavens, no!" quick as a flash, Claude answered.

"You don't?"

"I take the view, Dave, that your experiences are entirely a matter between you and—well, whoever you've had the experiences with."

"Tomkins. In Testament Buildings." Inchcape mentioned the name of the elderly barrister whose pupil he'd been.

"Please. Don't tell me! It's absolutely none of my business!" Claude was incredulous, but couldn't help asking, "You mean Tommy Tomkins?"

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"Yes, I was with him for about a year."

"But I thought Tommy was married to a lady magistrate?" Claude was shocked.

"So he is. Does that make any difference?"

"Well. Not nowadays, I suppose." Liz, Claude thought, would condemn his attitude as ridiculously old-fashioned. "The way I look at it is this, Dave. My attitude is— There's no real difference between us!"

"Except you've had a great deal more experience than I have," Inchcape suggested.

"I wouldn't say that," Claude denied hastily. "But of course I do have the children. Young Tristan and Isolde. A perpetual joy. Named after Wagner's star-crossed lovers, of course. You don't know what it's like having little ones around you."

"No, I'm sorry," the young bachelor apologized, but Claude reassured him, "No one's going to blame you. And think what you save us on the rates."

"What do you mean?" Now Inchcape was completely lost.

"By not having children. In my view you're absolutely entitled to counseling services." Claude stood up, conscious of a duty well done. "I'll be reporting to Ballard. I'm sure we'll be able to squeeze you in."

"I don't mind sharing a room." Inchcape stood and advanced on Claude Erskine-Brown, who backed away, saying, "Not with me, I'm afraid. That would hardly do, would it? Perhaps we can put you in with Liz Probert. Then you wouldn't have any—distractions!"

"Well, thank you, Claude. Thanks very much." Inchcape seemed to like the idea.

"Not at all. That way out, Dave."

"It was about the noon
Of a glorious day in June
When our General rode along us
For to form us for to fight . . ."

The battle was an exciting and exhilarating occasion, the trial of Lady Derwent on a charge of poisoning her husband. It was the General who let the side down, for I had been landed with a commanding officer with about as much talent for Old Bailey warfare as a sheep in Holy Orders. He was interested in body-building, which wouldn't do a thing except unnecessarily prolong the life of Ballard, but courage-building was what he needed—the talent to draw the

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saber and charge into the gunfire of Judge Gerald Graves. Into the mouth of hell! I couldn't see Ballard doing it. Cannon to right of him, cannon to left of him, and Ballard would sneak off home and exercise with his chest-expander. However, there was little I could do about it.

"Mine not to reason why, mine but to do or die," I murmured to myself as I arrived, short of breath but fully wigged and gowned for the fight ahead, in front of Judge Graves' Court. "Mine though I damn well know Bernard has blundered—briefing Ballard to lead *me!*" And then a resonant contralto voice interrupted my thoughts with "Your big case today, isn't it? I just saw Sam Ballard going up to the robing-room."

"That must have been a treat for you, Matron," I said, for the speaker was none other than the Old Bailey medical supremo, Mrs. Marguerite Plumstead, a powerfully built, still handsome woman who could deal in a swift and determined manner with fainting jurors or malingering criminals.

"I suppose it's a case of follow my leader for you today, isn't it, Mr. Rumpole?" I winced. "And our Sam was looking wonderfully well." She gave me a quick lookover and put me in the C.3 category. "Aren't we letting that naughty tummy of ours get a little out of hand?"

"I'm melting into thin air, thank you, Matron." I went on about my business and she called after me, "That's all right, my dear. I like to keep an eye on all my barristers."

The Court was full and the press benches crowded for the Derwent murder. That cold fish, Judge Gerald Graves, promoted above his station to try the case, decorated the Bench like something lifeless on a marble slab. Perdita was looking beautiful in the dock, but as though her thoughts were far away. Bunty was sitting largely in the public seats. She smiled at Perdita, who smiled faintly back. Marcus Griffin, the Senior Treasury Counsel, was prosecuting. Griffin is a perfectly nice, rather fair prosecutor, whom I like to treat as though he were some particularly ruthless Grand Inquisitor. His Junior, Arthurian Daybell, was seated behind him, and I, God save the mark, was seated behind Soapy Sam Ballard, Q.C. Such was the scene in which Marcus Griffin rose to his feet to open his case to the jury.

"Members of the jury," prosecuting Counsel began. "This case concerns the death, from a massive overdose of diamorphine, of Sir Daniel Derwent, R.A., the well known portrait painter. He had made

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a will leaving his entire estate, a considerable sum of money, members of the jury—something well over two million pounds—to his wife Perdita, the defendant in this case. He made no provision for his mother, Mrs. Barbara Derwent, or his daughter by a previous marriage, Helen, although the two ladies lived with him at number one, Ruskin Street, Chelsea, as members of his family."

"He *settled* money on them during his lifetime," I whispered urgently to the back of my not-so-learned leader. "It's quite unfair to suggest that our client scooped the pool."

"Horace, I do know." He tried to quieten me. "It *is* my brief."

"The jury haven't read your brief! Get up and tell them."

"Horace." He only wanted to be left in peace.

"Don't 'Horace' me! Get up on your hind legs, why don't you? Make your presence felt!"

"Mr. Ballard." The Judge sounded his most sepulchral note. "I think your Junior is trying to tell you something."

"I'm extremely sorry, my Lord." Ballard rose sycophantically. "I must apologize most sincerely for any interruption."

"No need to apologize. Sit down, Ballard." I couldn't resist rising to address the Court. "I was trying to communicate vital information to the jury, my Lord. Sir Daniel Derwent made a generous financial settlement on his mother and daughter during his lifetime."

"My Lord. That would appear to be correct," Griffin conceded after a brief word with his Junior.

"Of course it's correct!" I continued somewhat to my leader's chagrin. "It would also be correct if the Prosecution were to present the facts in a full and unbiased way to the jury at this stage and not try to color the evidence by a one-sided account."

"My Lord. I assure the Court that any mistake I may have made was quite unintentional," Griffin protested. I had got him on the defensive and followed on with "Provided it's agreed that this Prosecution is capable of mistakes."

"Mr. Rumpole!" I had succeeded in provoking a sort of frozen fury in his Lordship. "My understanding is that you appear here as Junior Counsel to your learned and very experienced leader, Mr. Samuel Ballard."

"Strange things happen down the Old Bailey," I muttered to no one in particular and my leader chimed in with, "My Lord. That is perfectly correct."

"Thank you, Mr. Ballard. I'm grateful for your assistance." When the Judge said that, Ballard bowed humbly and sat down. I was left

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standing on my own. "Then, no doubt, Mr. Rumpole," Graves continued, "you can safely leave any further objections and interruptions in the skillful hands of Mr. Samuel Ballard."

"You must be joking," I muttered again.

"I find difficulty in hearing you, Mr. Rumpole."

"You can rest assured I shall only interrupt again when the interests of justice demand it, my Lord." I said it very loudly and then sat down to give way to Griffin, who outlined the facts of Sir Daniel's death and showed the jury the incriminating articles—the used ampoules, the pamphlet, and the hypodermic—he undertook to prove were found in our client's bedroom. Then he told them:

"It will be our case that Lady Derwent, knowing exactly what she was doing because she had read this pamphlet, administered that massive overdose to her husband. She may have deluded herself into thinking that she was helping him to a peaceful and painless death, but of course that would be no defense to a charge of murder. Her true motive, the Prosecution will suggest, is money. The freehold of the Chelsea house and Sir Daniel's considerable investments would be hers on his death. Members of the jury. You will hear evidence about the matrimonial relationship of this couple. I have told you that they occupied separate bedrooms—"

"Because he couldn't *sleep!*" I tried to stir my leader into some sort of activity.

"Do you wish to interrupt *again,* Mr. Rumpole?" the judge was asking.

"No, my Lord." I rose as impressively as I could manage to my feet and stared at the jury. "I am quite content to let my learned friend Mr. Griffin continue with his inaccuracies. Our time will come!"

An early prosecution witness was Nurse Gregson, a thin, wiry, grey-haired lady who ministered to the sick and dying around Chelsea and took, I imagined, no nonsense from them. In answer to Marcus Griffin, she remembered calling at the house about four P.M. on the day Sir Daniel died to give him his injection. Miss Helen and Mrs. Barbara Derwent, the deceased's mother, were there, and, of course, Lady Derwent. Nurse Gregson glanced disapprovingly at the dock and said, "I couldn't help noticing her."

"Why not?" Griffin asked innocently.

"She was sitting on a chair, my Lord, stripped to the waist."

"Am I to understand that this young lady was sitting among the

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family with her bosoms unclothed?" His Lordship sounded incredulous.

"That is right, my Lord."

"Is that a criminal offense?" I whispered to my leader, loudly enough for the jury to hear. "Mr. Rumpole?" the Judge inquired, and I rose to address him. "I only ask for a legal direction, my Lord. At the moment this evidence seems utterly irrelevant."

At which point I sat down and the Judge spoke despairingly to my leader. "Mr. Ballard. Is there any way in which you can discourage further interruptions by your learned Junior?"

"I can only say I will do my best, my Lord." Soapy Sam rose humbly.

"Thank *you*, Mr. Ballard." The Judge was very much obliged and Marcus Griffin went back to work. "And you saw Sir Daniel Derwent?"

"Oh, yes. He was there. He was painting his wife's portrait."

"Painting unclothed bosoms," I whispered again for the benefit of the jury. "An unfortunate habit of artists throughout the centuries!"

"Mr. Ballard, I think Mr. Rumpole spoke again." The Judge was onto it, quick as a shot. Ballard rose sadly to admit, "That may very well be so, my Lord."

"See to it, Mr. Ballard." Those were his Lordship's orders. So Ballard said, "Ssh, Horace!" and I told him to keep quiet because I was trying to listen to the evidence, which now reached a vital point. Nurse Gregson described giving Sir Daniel the injection of diamorphine. "I understand," Griffin said, "this was a top-up injection, as he was in considerable pain?"

"Yes, it was. They always got me to give the injections. They had acquired a hypodermic but none of the family could use it, so I always did the job for them."

"*This* was the hypodermic they kept but didn't normally use?" My learned friend lifted the exhibit he said was found in Perdita's bedroom.

"I imagine so."

"Was the diamorphine you injected in ampoules?"

"Yes."

"Did you have other ampoules of morphine in your medical bag?"

"Yes, I did. I had other patients, of course." Nurse Gregson went on to give evidence of the number of missing ampoules and the milligrams they contained. Griffin said, "We have heard such a dose might prove fatal." He had called an expert who had testified to

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that; it was evidence that Ballard had not felt able to challenge. "Did you use any of the other ampoules when you gave Sir Daniel Derwent his injection?"

"No."

"Were the ampoules and their wrappings similar to these?" Griffin held up more of the treasure found in Perdita's bedroom.

"Yes, they were."

"After you had given the injection, what did you do?"

"I went out into the hall, with my bag, and I was putting on my coat when Mrs. Derwent—"

"The deceased's mother?"

"Yes. She asked if I'd like to stay for a cup of tea. I said I would and I went back into the studio. I left my bag in the hall."

"Unattended?"

"Yes. Mrs. Derwent went out to make the tea and Lady Derwent was given a break from sitting. She put on some kind of wrap and went out to help her mother-in-law."

"What about you?"

"Oh, I stayed in the studio."

"Did Sir Daniel leave the studio at all while you were there?"

"I couldn't be certain. If he did, it was only for a few minutes."

"Did Miss Helen Derwent leave it?"

"No. I'm sure she didn't."

"Why do you say that?"

"We were talking about the garden she looked after. We're both keen gardeners."

"And how did your visit end?"

"We all had tea and I collected my bag and left. I went off duty then and didn't check the contents of my bag until next morning. I discovered that a large number of diamorphine ampoules were missing from my bag. These were to be used in the treatment of other patients, my Lord. I also heard on the radio that Sir Daniel had died during the night. I immediately telephoned the Derwent household. Dr. Harman was there and I told him the whole thing."

"Nurse Gregson," Griffin ended, "are you quite sure that you didn't administer a massive overdose of diamorphine on that afternoon to your patient, Sir Daniel Derwent?"

"I am a state registered nurse with twenty-five years' experience, my Lord. I am quite certain that I did not."

"I am quite certain that I did not." Graves was delighted to make that note. Griffin sat and Ballard rose slowly. It was, as I whispered

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to him, his great moment. He stood in silence for a while and then turned to whisper for my help. "Is there any particular question?"

"Couldn't Sir Daniel have administered the overdose to himself? If he had the diamorphine and a hypodermic syringe." I loaded him with my best ammunition.

"Ah, yes." Ballard tried to look as though he'd thought of it himself. "If Sir Daniel had been in possession of that syringe, and a large number of diamorphine ampoules, could he not have administered an overdose to himself?"

"I suppose it's possible," Nurse Gregson answered reluctantly.

"And might he not have left the studio when your bag was unattended in the hall?" I filled Ballard with another round. He turned to the witness, appeared to think the matter over carefully, and said, "And let me ask you this. Sir Daniel might have left the studio when tea was being prepared. And your bag was in the hall and he might have taken the diamorphine from it?"

"I have said he might have gone out for a few minutes. That's all."

Our work was done, but still Ballard lingered on his feet. I whispered some words of command. "Sit down and shut up. Don't spoil it now."

"And you admit that Sir Daniel *could* have injected himself?" Soapy Sam couldn't take orders.

"He *could* have. But I don't think he did," the witness told him.

"Leave it alone, Ballard!" The situation was desperate, but my leader went on, delighted with himself. "Tell the members of the jury, Nurse Gregson. *Why* don't you think so?" It was, of course, the one question that shouldn't have been asked, and the witness was delighted to answer it.

"Sir Daniel had a horror of hypodermic needles," she told the jury. "I'm quite sure he could not have done such a thing on his own."

My learned leader had scored an own goal, and it was four o'clock, crumpet-time, although I wasn't allowed crumpets. Marcus Griffin said he thought it was too late to embark on the evidence of Miss Helen Derwent, which might take a little time, and the Judge told the members of the jury that they would meet again at ten-thirty the next morning when "we shall hope to proceed without further interruptions from Mr. Rumpole."

When the Court rose, Ballard retired to the Q.C.s' robing-room on the top floor of the Old Bailey. He was delighted to find the room empty, as he had some sort of workout in mind. He removed his wig and gown, tailed Court coat and waistcoat, and then opened his

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briefcase and removed his much-loved chest-expander. This particular instrument of torture had two wooden handles, which Ballard gripped, and he proceeded to haul away at the steel spring, expanding his chest and shouting orders to himself. "One two! One two!" This is what he was doing when I opened the door and put my head round it, having had a few ideas on the cross-examination of Miss Helen Derwent.

"One two! In out!" chanted my leader, who didn't seem to have heard me. He had the chest-expander pulled out to its fullest possible extent when I called out sharply, "Ballard!"

At that, he turned suddenly, losing his grip on one of the handles, which flew inward, propelled by the spring, and, having struck him smartly on the side of the head, felled him to the ground. I was left standing, looking down at an unconscious leader. I suppose I should have warned him that exercise is likely to prove fatal. I crossed to the telephone and asked the operator to put out an urgent call for Matron on the Tannoy.

Soon the great Palais de Justice was ringing with the call of "Matron to the Q.C.s' robing-room at once, please!" They heard it in the canteen, in the Judge's corridors, and in the cells. In no time at all, Mrs. Marguerite Plumstead was kneeling beside the fallen figure who had been stunned by his own chest-expander.

Ballard opened his eyes, focused on the concerned face peering down at him, and whispered, "Matey!"

"*You* are to carry on, Mr. Rumpole?" Judge Graves looked at me in some horror as I rose in Court the next morning to announce the unfortunate indisposition of my learned leader. I had met Matron in the corridor and she had told me that Ballard was strained, and he had been severely shocked. The doctor, it seemed, had ordered him to take two days' complete rest. "He's being so wonderfully brave about it." Matron looked a little misty-eyed. "Never a thought of self. Well, isn't that our lovely Sam all over? Almost his last words as we got him into the ambulance were, 'Of course Rumpole will ask for an adjournment.' "

"Delirious, no doubt," I said, and went into Court to announce that I was prepared to act without the inestimable advantage of Mr. Ballard's inspired leadership. "My client," I assured Judge Graves, "is most anxious there should be no further delays. She has waited too long to be cleared of these monstrous allegations." He sighed heavily, but came to the conclusion that he had no choice but to

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continue with the case if I weren't asking for an adjournment until the recovery of Ballard. "I hope your client realizes the risk she is taking," he said in a voice of terrible warning, "in depriving herself of her leading Council's wisdom and *moderation*."

I bowed and resumed my seat. Happily, the time for moderation was over and I meant to launch an immoderate attack on the principal witness against us. Whilst Griffin was taking Miss Helen Derwent gently through her evidence-in-chief, I whispered a few vital instructions to Bernard. I wanted him to issue a subpoena on the organization Across the River or use any other means at his disposal to get a list of their members. Then I leaned back to look at my client's stepdaughter.

Helen was dark and Perdita fair. Helen was intense, serious, and capable, I thought, of bearing long grudges. Perdita was gentle, smiled easily, and was, I judged, forgiving. No doubt Helen was like her mother, Derwent's first wife, and if that were so I could imagine with what relief he embraced his second marriage. He would have been like a man enjoying a late summer holiday. As I watched her, Helen told the jury, in a quiet, unemotional tone, that she had found the empty ampoules and the pamphlet in Perdita's chest-of-drawers and the hypodermic in her bedroom cupboard, although it was usually kept in the cupboard in her late father's bedroom.

This was the witness I rose to cross-examine in the welcome absence of my learned leader. I decided to go right to the heart of her evidence and waste no time on polite persiflage. "Miss Derwent. You didn't approve of your father's second wife?"

"She was very young and feckless. I suppose he was besotted with her, in a way." She looked at Perdita in the dock, and the young woman lowered her eyes, avoiding a confrontation.

"I suppose some men enjoy being besotted?" I suggested.

"Perhaps."

"By 'feckless' you mean incompetent?"

"Totally incompetent! On the very night my father died, for instance, she had forgotten to order the fish."

"How terrible!" I looked at the jury.

"It may not sound much, but Daddy looked forward to his fish pie on a Friday night. Of course, Perdita had forgotten to order it, so we had to have omelettes."

"Did Lady Derwent cook them?"

"Perdita?" The witness smiled scornfully. "Of course not. She was just about up to boiling water. I think Granny cooked them."

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"Just omelettes for dinner?"

"I think we had some mulligatawny soup Granny had made the day before. Oh, and treacle tart. Is that what you wanted to know?"

It wasn't really. I just couldn't keep off the subject of food. I forced myself to another topic. "His painting meant a great deal to your father?"

"It was his whole life."

"His increasing illness meant that a time was coming when he would no longer be able to paint. That night he'd spoiled a picture, didn't he?"

"I remember that."

"That was a terrible prospect for an artist who loved his work."

"Yes."

"So might he not have felt he had nothing left to live for and taken his own life? Have you considered that possibility?" I turned and asked the jury to consider it, but Helen said quickly, "Daddy never mentioned suicide!"

"Never mentioned it to you, perhaps."

"Or to anyone, as far as I know. Besides, he still had a lot to live for."

"You mean he had his happiness with a beautiful young wife?"

"No." She looked at me with intense dislike. "I didn't mean that."

"Miss Derwent." I leant forward and kept my eyes on her face. We were coming to the vital part of her testimony. "You found your father dead in his studio?"

"I couldn't sleep, so I went downstairs. I found him then. On the couch." She put her hand over her face and trembled a little, but I don't think she was crying.

"Please"—Judge Graves looked almost human—"don't distress yourself, Miss Derwent."

"Then you telephoned Doctor Harman. He called and arranged for the removal of your father's body. He called again later, and spoke to your grandmother and your stepmother. While he was doing that, do you say you searched Lady Derwent's bedroom?"

"I took a look round in there, yes."

"You took a look round? In the hope of finding something that would incriminate your stepmother?"

"No."

"Then *why?*"

Helen was silent then, thinking. At last she said, "I never thought

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Perdita would be able to face looking after Daddy through his final illness. She was just too young and—"

" 'Feckless.' Is that the word you'd use?"

"Exactly! So it often occurred to me that she might try and, well—help Daddy out of this world. And," she added coldly, "especially if it would be so much to her financial advantage."

"Did Daddy tell you he was leaving all his money to his young wife?"

"He said that, yes."

"Having previously settled comfortable incomes on you and his mother."

"That's been agreed by the Prosecution," the Judge thought fit to remind me. "We needn't waste time on that."

"Your Lordship is always helpful." I smiled sweetly at the old darling and asked the witness, "You know something, I expect, about the law of wills?"

"I know a little."

"Do you know that if Lady Derwent is found guilty of her husband's murder she will inherit nothing?"

"We all know *that,* Mr. Rumpole." The Judge's patience, never in lavish supply, was running out.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my Lord," I apologized. "I'd forgotten that the members of the jury had all passed their Bar exams." I got a little laughter from the jury, quickly silenced by an angry "Mr. Rumpole!" from the Judge. I turned hurriedly back to the witness. "Very well, Miss Derwent. Did you know that or didn't you?"

"I suppose I may have had some idea that that was the law. It would only be fair."

"So that this two-million-pound estate would then be divided between you and your grandmother."

"Yes, I suppose it would."

"An extremely unsatisfactory result so far as you're concerned?"

For the first time, the jury looked at Helen Derwent with suspicion, so the Judge thought it time to interrupt my flow. "Mr. Rumpole," he asked, "are you suggesting that these exhibits—the used ampoules, the syringe, and the pamphlet—were never in your client's bedroom at all?"

"Your Lordship sees the point so quickly." I gave him the retort courteous, and then turned on the witness. "You found these used ampoules, didn't you, near your father's body? Probably the syringe was there, too. And the pamphlet, was that his?"

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Helen Derwent no longer disliked me, she hated me. But her voice was still controlled as she asked, "What are you accusing me of?"

"Mr. Rumpole." The Judge came to her rescue. "May I remind you of the evidence Nurse Gregson gave. This witness remained in the studio with the nurse during the whole time the medical bag was left unattended. She had no chance at all of removing the diamorphine ampoules."

"Oh, I agree with that, my Lord." I was Rumpole respectful. "I'm not suggesting for a moment that Miss Helen Derwent killed her father."

"Well, what are you suggesting, may I ask?"

"That she put those exhibits in my client's bedroom in the hope that some gullible jury might convict her of murder, my Lord."

"Oh, really!" Helen was still fighting. "And how do you say my father died?"

"I say what the jury is going to say, when they have considered all the evidence," I answered her with all the confidence I could muster. "He killed himself when his painter's hand would no longer obey his orders."

That night, as I was ingesting Thin-O-Vite, Mr. Bernard telephoned and told me he had managed to get a membership list of the Across the River Society at last. So I learned something that I should, perhaps, have thought of before. Now I had learnt it too late. My defense had been firmly planted in the minds of the jury and it would be dangerous to change horses in midstream, particularly as the other horse was as dark and so uncertain a runner. I lay awake thinking of my final speech to the jury—my last opportunity to convince them of the possibility of Daniel Derwent's suicide.

By morning I had decided not to put Perdita in the witness-box. More customers sink themselves by their own evidence than ever get scuppered by the prosecution witnesses. I saw no point in calling my client so that Marcus Griffin could try to squeeze some admission out of her to boost his tottering case. I had all the facts I wanted—now was the time for some gentle persuasion. I thought of another cogent argument for going straight to final speeches and not calling Perdita. If I did so, there was a decent chance of getting the case over before Ballard got back to ruin it all.

"No accused person can be forced into the witness-box," I told the jury. "Lady Derwent has been accused of the abominable crime of murdering the husband she loved. She is fully entitled, as you or I

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would be, were we accused, to say to this blundering Prosecution, 'All right, prove it. Don't expect any help in your unsavory work from me.' And at the end of the day to say to you now that nothing, nothing at all, has been proved beyond reasonable doubt. A successful painter, who loves his art, finds that, through illness, he can paint no longer. Can you not understand, can't we all understand, his deciding to end his life? Nurse Gregson leaves her bag in the hall. Sir Daniel Derwent leaves the studio for just long enough, perhaps only a few minutes, to take those diamorphine ampoules. Later that night he injects himself with a massive overdose. Nurse Gregson tells us he didn't like needles. Not many of us do, members of the jury, but if we are desperate enough we can all use them. The desperate addict forces himself to use them when longing for his fix. The desperately ill artist was also forced to inject himself when longing for death. So what remains of this pathetic prosecution? Merely Helen Derwent's evidence of what she says she found after her father's death. Why *did* she, cold and calculating as she is, go up to her stepmother's bedroom on that terrible morning after she had found her father dead, when any normal woman would be too overcome with grief to do anything? Was it to find evidence? Or to *plant* evidence? Of course, these things were in the house, her father had used them. Did she lie and say she had found them in Perdita's bedroom to feed her spite and to satisfy her greed for money? Members of the jury, I suggest that you wouldn't convict in a case of non-renewed dog license on the evidence of Miss Helen Derwent."

One of the happier moments in a barrister's life is when he sits down at the end of his final speech. A huge weight seems to have been lifted from his shoulders. He has done all he can and his work is over. The jury has to decide the case, and in that decision he can take no further part.

Judge Graves summed up in a manner as hostile to the Defense as he could manage without giving a free run to the Court of Appeal. His delivery, however, was so lugubrious and monotone that even the eagerest juror could be seen closing his eyes occasionally, and I doubted if the subtle insertions of his boot would have much effect.

When the jury had gone, my anxiety returned. I have never paced a Court corridor smoking too many cigars or sat in the canteen drinking too many cups of coffee waiting for a verdict without a dry mouth and sweaty palms, as though it was Rumpole and not his client who stood in danger of the nick. The stakes were perhaps

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higher in this case, as I had taken the great gamble of not calling my client. If she were convicted, I would never be sure I had made the right decision. And had I fought the whole case on a false assumption? Now I knew the truth, or thought I did, should I have taken the desperate step of trying to start again? I lit another small cigar and told myself that the game was over, the judicial croupier had called *'rien n'va plus!'* and there was nothing to do except wait for the roulette wheel to stop spinning.

As these thoughts were going through my mind, I saw a spreading figure in a black dress sitting alone on a distant bench. As I sat down beside Bunty Derwent, she looked at me and asked, "She'll get off, won't she?" Although she was a fat old woman, she had, I thought, the calm and trusting face of a child.

"I suppose you think anyone should get off," I told her. "I mean, anyone who killed him, speaking as a member of the Across the River Society. You are a member, aren't you? It was *your* pamphlet?"

There was a silence and then she said, "He couldn't paint any more. He wouldn't want to live if he couldn't paint."

"Are you sure?" That had been my defense, but I was an advocate—I wasn't necessarily convinced by it.

"Oh, yes, Perfectly sure. It was for the best."

"Individual omelettes?" I asked her. "And the soup—served out in the kitchen, was it? Mulligatawny. I suppose that would hide the taste of the diamorphine."

"What are you trying to say, Mr. Rumpole?" She was like a child, I thought again, and determined not to understand difficult questions.

"Nothing very complicated," I assured her. "Only that you pinched the ampoules from the nurse's bag. You knew exactly what they looked like. You got the contents of those ampoules into your son's food somehow. I suppose you left them somewhere in the kitchen where Helen found them and used them to put all the blame on the stepmother she hated. What I'd like to know is this—"

"There's something you want to know? I thought you had all the answers!" The old woman was almost laughing at me.

"Did you discuss this sudden decision to end his life with your son at all? What were his views on the subject?"

"Oh, there was no need for a discussion," she explained carefully, as though I were the child. "A mother knows, Mr. Rumpole. A mother always knows."

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"And you let Perdita go through this trial—" It was hard to forgive her.

"Oh, you'll get her off." I found her confidence in my powers a little chilling. "I've got absolutely no doubt about that. She's quite innocent."

"I wish I had your simple faith in British justice," I told her, but then the usher came out of the door of the Court and called to us. The jury was coming back and Perdita's fate had been decided.

The formalities, as always, seemed to take forever. The jury had to answer to their names. The foreman had to be asked to stand, and then to be asked if they had reached a verdict upon which they were all agreed. When that had been done, the Court door opened and Ballard was suddenly among us like a wounded soldier unexpectedly back from the wars, his head bandaged under his wig and walking with the aid of a stick and Matron. He settled into the row in front of me just as the final question was asked. "Do you find the defendant Perdita Derwent guilty or not guilty of murder?"

The answer, as always, seemed to take forever, and I held my breath until it came.

"Not guilty, my Lord."

I saw Perdita in the dock, her eyes filled with tears of sorrow and relief, which, now that it was over, she was finding it hard to control. I saw Bunty, the mother who knew best, smiling as though there had never been any doubt about the verdict. Then Ballard had the nerve to stand and ask if our client could be released, just as though he'd done all the work.

"Lady Derwent," Ballard said to Perdita when they sprang her from the dock. "I'm so very glad we were able to pull it off for you."

"It's a wonderful victory for Sam, isn't it?" Matron was looking as pleased as Punch. "Considering he was away so much of the time."

"Matron was a ministering angel, Rumpole," Ballard confided in me. "She practically camped out in the hospital. She wouldn't let me come back until she was quite sure I was out of danger."

"Well, I suppose we should all be grateful for that," I said, and then took my leave of Perdita. "Mr. Rumpole," she said as Ballard looked on, "how can I thank you?"

"Oh, I don't know. Just go on living," I suggested. "You've got a great deal of it left to do." We parted then, and I hoped she'd find another husband and never set her foot in a Law Court again.

Not long after his self-proclaimed triumph in the Derwent murder

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case, Ballard called a Chambers meeting. There were two items on the agenda—the admission of a new tenant and what our Head had advertised as a "big surprise"—the exact nature of which he didn't propose to tell us until we met. Claude Erskine-Brown proposed a new member for our gallant band of legal hacks in Equity Court. "I just think it'd be jolly bad if this Chambers got the reputation for any sort of discrimination," he told us.

"I'm with you there, Claude." Ballard nodded wisely. "Entirely with you."

"Which is why I'm particularly keen on the admission of young David—Dave." Claude looked serious. "He prefers the style 'Dave' Inchcape."

"Is Inchcape black?" Uncle Tom muttered.

"No, Uncle Tom," Claude told him. "Dave is not black."

"Pity." Uncle Tom searched for a precedent. "They had a little black chap in old Batty Jackson's Chambers. Let him in after a great deal of soul-searching. And then this little chap went off and became Prime Minister of Limpopoland or whatever, and he made old Batty Lord Chief Justice. Other fellows in Chambers got Attorney-General and all sorts of rich pickings. Would you like to go off to Limpopoland, Rumpole?"

"Anywhere where they don't have Chambers meetings."

"It seems that Liz Probert and Dave are prepared to share a room, so there should be no problems accommodations wise." Claude then moved to a subject which caused him only minor embarrassment. "As I say, I have met Dave and he's been extremely frank with me. 'Out of the closet,' as we would say."

"Out of the closet?" Uncle Tom was puzzled. "Are they going to put this black fellow in the closet?"

It seemed that Ballard wanted to get onto the next item on the agenda. He dealt with the matter shortly. "So, if no one has any objections to Inchcape—Rumpole?"

"Is he keen on exercise?" I wanted to know.

"I don't think people like Dave usually are, are they?" Claude smiled tolerantly.

"Then I don't mind him in the least."

"Good. That's settled then." Here Ballard took a deep breath and looked around us with a certain pride. It was the moment to divulge his great secret. "Now I have an announcement to make of a purely personal and private nature," he began. "You will all know Mrs.

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Marguerite Plumstead, the Matron down at the Old Bailey. She is respected and, may I say, loved by so many barristers."

"A formidable lady!" I agreed.

"During my recent indisposition," he went on, undeterred, "Matey, as I shall always think of her, was a ministering angel to me. She was at my bedside in hospital. She saw me through my convalescence. We have been thrown together as a result of my accident. I am now happy to tell you that I shall no longer be living a bachelor existence in Waltham Cross. Mrs. Plumstead has consented to become my wife!"

If I didn't know what a stunned silence was like, I discovered then. We had all imagined that Soapy Sam Ballard was settled in his ways and resigned to solitude, and if he had been smitten by a final, irresistible passion, the masterful figure of the Old Bailey Matron seemed an unlikely love object. However, it was useless to speculate on the mysterious chemistry which had drawn these two together and I had only one question for our Head of Chambers.

"Have you consulted *Mr.* Plumstead at all?"

"Mr. Plumstead, after long service in the Department of the Environment, has, I regret to say, passed over."

"Oh, I see. Across the river!"

"Of course, you will all be invited to attend the celebrations, with your wives."

"And in the case of Dave Inchcape, no doubt—" Claude widened the invitation in the interest of tolerance "—live-in companions."

Ballard was as good as his word and in due course we all hired toppers and tailed coats from Moss Bros and were invited to guzzle and sluice in a handsome marquee erected for the purpose, after the unlikely union had been celebrated in the Temple Church. There was a large cake on which the tiny figures of a gowned-and-wigged Ballard and a uniformed Matron stood over a scrawled message in pink icing which read *Best of Luck to Sam and Marguerite.* Matron cut the cake to general applause and then approached Hilda with a minute segment on a plate. I watched the scene moodily, eating a few peanuts, whilst the barristers around me were stuck into the salmon and champagne. "Won't you have a wee slice of cake, Mrs. Rumpole," Matron asked, "as it's *such* a special occasion?"

"Of course I will. Whyever not?" Hilda found the offering with some difficulty.

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"I thought you might be watching that naughty tummy. Like your husband."

"Rumpole and I are both perfectly fit, thank you, Matron." No one can say "Thank you" with such bitter irony as She Who Must Be Obeyed.

"Oh, I know. Sam says your husband was such a help to him in the big murder. I'm so glad old Rumpole can still lend a hand as a *junior* barrister."

"Old Rumpole, as you call him, seems to have done the big murder largely on his own." Hilda was displeased. "As he did the Penge Bungalow Murders. You must have heard of that case."

"I'm not sure I have."

"I really envy you, Matron—" Hilda smiled sweetly "—having so much to learn about the law."

I wandered off then, to have a look at more food I couldn't participate in, and found Henry depressed. "It's happened, Mr. Rumpole," he told me. "My wife's turn has come. She is no longer a Chair."

"What now?"

"My year has started. I'm now Mayoress of Bexley Heath."

"Henry! My heart bleeds for you."

"Dianne is being extremely brave about it."

I hardly had time to give our clerk my full sympathy when Hoskins, the grey barrister much concerned with the education of his daughters, came up with some more extraordinary news. "Rumpole! Terribly sad, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. I suppose if you want to prolong your life you've got no alternative but to marry Matey."

"No. Sad about Hector MacClintock. He was your doctor, too, wasn't he?"

"What's happened?"

"Dropped dead. And he must have been considerably younger than you."

"Oh, dear! I *am* sorry. Poor Dr. MacClintock. I'm very sorry. And he took all those precautions." It was, of course, a blow, but one fact stood out a mile. Unlike the careful doctor, I was still alive. I took a large dinner plate and began to fill it methodically, decorating cold beef, a chicken drumstick, and fish with a generous dollop of potato salad. Looking up from this work for a moment, I saw a young couple, clearly in love, embracing behind a palm in a corner of the tent. They were Mizz Liz Probert and our new entrant David, or

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"Dave," Inchcape—and, watching them like a man who has been totally deceived and is feeling particularly bitter about it, was my learned friend, Claude Erskine-Brown.

"Look at that, Rumpole." The man was clearly outraged. "The ice-cold cheek of it! The fellow's a raving heterosexual!"

"That Inchcape." Uncle Tom joined us, apparently puzzled. "Remarkably fair skin for an African prime minister. Do you think we've been led up the garden?"

I took my plate over to where Hilda was sitting and told her why I now felt free to scoff at will, filling our glasses with Ballard's bubbly. She might have had a few words to say on the subject, but Claude had gone to the center of the tent and embarked on a speech.

"A big welcome to you all," he said. "Ladies and gentlemen. Fellow members of Chambers. As Sam Ballard's best man, and as his learned leader in the field of matrimony"—there was a smidgin of laughter at this and Phillida sighed—"it's my pleasure to wish the happy couple health."

"Not too much health." I was refilling my champagne glass. "Just enough health to stand up in Court and lift a glass to your lips. It's the quality of life that matters, isn't it? The quality of life. And the hell with Thin-O-Vite."

"Q"

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"I'll murder my wife," the Englishman swore,
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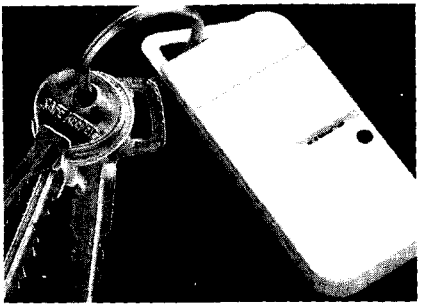

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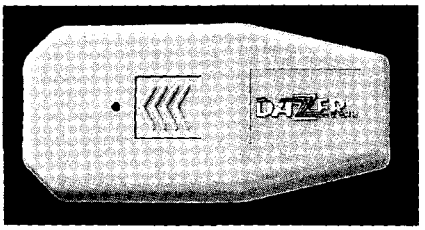

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MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ GOURMET POPCORN POPPER

All new high temperature 6 qt. popcorn popper. Most electric and hot-air poppers "puff" the corn more than they "pop" it, leaving it tough with hard centers. This flat-bottomed stove-top popper reaches 475° and pops full in two minutes with 6 quarts of the best popcorn you ever tasted. Stirring paddle with through-the-crank handle virtually eliminates burnt or unpopped kernels. Wooden handle for safe grip, two dump lids. Pop without oil for delicious diet popcorn. 370 calories per 4 qt. bowl. Produce tender, fluffy, old fashioned movie theater popcorn with the Detonator™ popper. Made in the USA. **$24.98** ($5.00) #A1950.

▼ FOR THE BIRDS

A super feeding system that really is "for the birds". The Meta Wild Birc Feeder™ has a unique tri-level perch design that encourages different species to feed together. It is easy to fill and provides a total of 30 inches of feeding space and holds 2½ quarts of seed in six individual feeding stations, so different seed mixes can be used to attract different species of birds. The feeder features 2-way optical quality mirror panels that lets you watch from just inches away, while the birds feed undisturbed. Constructed of durable and attractive Lexan®, the feeder is easy to clean, even in the dishwasher. The Meta Feeder™ measures 26"x14"x5", comes fully assembled and mounts easily to any window. Plus, it comes with a lifetime warranty. So, get in on the biggest hobby in the U.S. and "feed the birds". **$79.98** ($10.00) #A1946.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. **070 EL**, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-365-8493**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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